

NO MORE, NO LESS

EXPLORING THE EXTENT AND LIMITS
OF THE MISSION OF THE VISIBLE CHURCH

A THESIS-PROJECT

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF
GORDON-CONWELL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

DAVID A. SHERWOOD

JANUARY 2017

To my beloved Kimberly Ann
No words can express how grateful I am
for your companionship, encouragement, and love.

“Many women have done excellently,
but you surpass them all.” (Proverbs 31:29)

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	v
Chapter	
1. PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS	1
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	23
3. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS	41
4. TWELVE THESES ON THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH	67
5. TOWARD A MORE FAITHFUL MISSION IN PROVIDENCE	99
BIBLIOGRAPHY	122

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis-project is to explore the extent and the limits of the mission of the visible church. This is to be done within the context of Presbyterian ecclesiology and with a view toward promoting a more biblically faithful ministry at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Providence, Rhode Island. The thesis will raise certain introductory considerations, survey relevant literature, engage a variety of theological considerations, set forth twelve theses on the mission of the church, and evaluate the ministry of TPC (past, present, and future) in light of the conclusions reached.

CHAPTER 1

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

“Throughout the earthly history of the Christian Church there has ever been a difficulty in drawing that mystic line which separates the human, standing for the things of this world, from the Divine, which represents the sphere of the Eternal. Before the Canon of Scripture had been closed, a tendency to such confusion was manifest; and so it is little wonder that, in these latter days, a right relation between the Empire of Caesar and the Kingdom of God is frequently obscured. The errors of this sort are so often, not the results of premeditated evil, but rather the children of a misconception of the nature and province of the Church of the Living God. But truth, in this connection, though crushed to earth, has always risen again; and even when the true doctrine of the Church appears to have fallen into obscurity, there have been raised up spirits who could not rest until just notions of the relations of the Church and the State have been regained.”

---Thomas A. Spence, “The Southern Presbyterian Church and the Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church”

One might legitimately wonder, especially given the practical intent of the present study, what relevance the above opening to an obscure and arcane Ph.D. dissertation from the University of Edinburgh has. How could the relationship between church and state in the context of 19th century Southern Presbyterianism have a bearing on the mission of the church today? The relevance lies in tendencies that are never peculiar to one generation,

one context, but rather endemic to any and all eras and places where the kingdom of God is expanding. There are always errors which, though “not the results of premeditated evil,” are nonetheless “children of a misconception of the nature and province of the Church of the Living God.” And it is to be wondered if our time, our cultural context, though one in which the vibrancy and activity of the Christian church are evident, nonetheless is open to the charge of being a season in which the true doctrine of the church has in fact fallen into relative obscurity; and that, therefore, there is a present and pressing need for “just notions” of the church’s mission to be articulated and clarified. It is to be hoped that this present study can make at least some small contribution to this need’s being met.

It was the early 1990’s. The church was a Presbyterian church in suburban Dallas of which I was the pastor. Part of our church’s budget, in addition to the various and sundry line items that one would expect—salary and benefits and education and missions and maintenance and refreshments—was one relatively small commitment: \$50 per month, or \$600 per year, to the Crisis Pregnancy Center of Northwest Dallas. This was not a lot of money. But it was a token of commitment to the prolife movement, to the efforts that were underway, not merely to dissuade young women from having abortions, but to meet the very practical needs of counseling, prenatal care, food, clothing, shelter, and family. There was not a person among us who doubted that this was a vital ministry in our community. And our church’s commitment was augmented by my serving on the pregnancy center’s board of directors, for several years as board president.

However, one year as we were drafting the budget, I recommended that we, as a church, discontinue supporting the crisis pregnancy center. Why? Why would I

recommend that we stop funding a ministry about which everyone was so enthusiastic? Were we having financial difficulties that precluded our continued support? Was there something bad and horrible happening at the CPC that made continued association imprudent? Had I had some conflict-filled falling out with the other members of the board? Were we somehow pulling back from our commitment to the sanctity of the life of the unborn child and our belief that women in crisis pregnancies should be cared for? Not at all! It was simply a matter of our having come to the conviction that the support of a general benevolence (i.e., an organization that cares for people's needs irrespective of whether or not they have faith in Christ) like a crisis pregnancy center is outside the purview of the church's ministry. . .and therefore should not be included in its budget. Yet in the very act of removing it from our budget, we reaffirmed to people our high esteem for the work of crisis pregnancy centers and commended this particular organization as worth of the *individual support* of our church's members. I remained a committed member of the board of directors and my wife and I made it a point to support the center regularly with our finances.

This distinction between something's being a great idea and a worthy pursuit yet not properly part of the church's ministry is at the heart of this study. How one understands and sorts through these issues will have significant implications for the shape and contours of local church ministry.

Consider another issue from just a few years ago. Prior to Rhode Island's legalizing same-sex marriage, there was a vigorous effort on the part of a diverse coalition of individuals to support traditional, heterosexual marriage. Part of this effort included a set of affirmations and denials which various religious leaders were asked to

sign as a means of providing a unified and public commitment to traditional marriage. Heightening this significance of this issue for me was the fact that one of our church's elders served as the Executive Director for the Rhode Island chapter of the National Organization for Marriage (NOM). It would seem natural and reasonable for the man running public policy point in Rhode Island to ask his pastor to add his name to the list of signatories.

Now, I was certainly clear on my commitment to God's design for marriage as being between a man and a woman. And I was equally clear on my belief that same sex relationships, however they are labeled or recognized, are sinful. But the question I struggled with was this: should I be part of an effort to steer public policy *in my capacity as an official representative of the church*? The italicized clause is critical; I had no reservations about steering public policy as a private individual. But does the Christian church, by means of its official representatives, have this role? I have no doubts that the church has a role of bearing public testimony to its view of marriage. But does it have the additional and more specific role of arguing that the law of the state ought to codify its view marriage? This, for me, was the sticking point. . .and the reason why I declined to sign the document. Was this the right decision? Was I acting within appropriate parameters in my capacity as a gospel minister? Or was I acting out of fear, afraid to take a public stand, unwilling to become entangled in a controversial issue?

As of this writing, I have spent the last twenty-eight years serving as a minister in the Presbyterian Church in America (the PCA). While, from the outside (especially outside the broad community of Reformed Evangelicalism), the PCA may look like a

monolith composed of men and women in lockstep uniformity, the fact of the matter is that our denomination admits of striking diversity and on a number of fronts.

One of the ways in which we are diverse is our understanding of the nature of the church's mission, its extent and its limits. Now, the phrase "our understanding" could have reference to the understanding that finds expression in our church's constitution, that collection of documents that officially define our beliefs and practices. To whatever extent there is value in such a definition (and I would submit there is great, though not exclusive, value in it), we also need to pay attention to the varied beliefs and practices of our ministers, members, and churches. And varied they are indeed.

My own journey certainly contributes to and reflects this variety. Pastorates in suburban Dallas, Texas (the setting of the story with which I opened this chapter) and now downtown Providence, Rhode Island have been the contexts in which my understanding of the church's mission has been forged. Due to a variety of influences, the early years of my ministry were characterized by a relatively narrow construction of the church's mission; a narrow construction which certainly found expression in my first pastorate.

During these years, I became increasingly aware of the broader constructions that many in our circles placed upon the church's mission. Some of these understandings were easy to dismiss, especially those that smacked of the crass politicization of the church (of the left or of the right, it matters not which) which had become so endemic in Evangelical and Reformed circles. Others, quite honestly, gave me reason to pause. Churches that adopted a "word and deed" ministry seemed to be able to connect with the whole person, and thereby give the gospel message an enhanced credibility, in a way that

my more limited approach did not seem to be able to do. As the years went by, and as new generations emerged, it seemed that more and more people were becoming persuaded that, in order for the gospel to be credible, in order for Christianity to *seem* and to *be* authentic, they had to connect with and meet the needs of the whole person. As much as my instincts were to repudiate fads and fashions, I could not help but wonder if my approach to gospel ministry was truncated and anemic because of my failure to embrace a more full-orbed and multi-dimensional strategy.

For the last eleven years, I have served a church in Providence. While any community (including suburban Dallas) has people with a variety of needs, there is a sense in which a city like Providence accentuates the variety, the multiform nature of human brokenness, fragmentation, and sorrow. Somehow it presses in on one more in a city than it does in suburbia. And this, in turn, highlights the potential disparity, the disconnection, between a narrowly-construed church mission and the world the church is seeking to serve.

Presumably, the goal of all biblical churches is to have a ministry that is as full and multi-faceted as is warranted by Scripture, but no more so. No one, in principle, wants to have an anemic and truncated sense of mission; nor, presumably, does anyone want to broaden the parameters of the church's mission beyond what Christ intends. But, though there may be wholehearted agreement as to these general goals, there is wide divergence as to what the ministry of the church *ought* to look like.

To cite one colorful example from the 19th century, consider the concern expressed by James Henley Thornwell, a Southern Presbyterian, over the broadening of the church's mission he observed in his day. Referring to the visible church, he says:

If she undertakes to meddle with the things of Caesar, she must expect to be crushed by the sword of Caesar. If she condescends to put herself upon a level with the countless institutes which philanthropy or folly has contrived for the earthly good of the race, she must expect to share the fate of human devices and expedients. She is of God, and if she forgets that it is her Divine prerogative to speak in the name and by the authority of God— if she relinquishes the dialect of Canaan, and stoops to babble in the dialects of earth— she must expect to be treated as a babbler. Her strength lies in comprehending her spiritual vocation. She is different from all other societies among men. Though as a society she has ethical and political relations in common with the permanent organizations of the Family and the State, yet in her essence, her laws, and her ends she is diverse from every other institute. The ties which bind men together in other societies are only mediately from God and immediately from man; she is immediately from God and mediately from man. The laws of other societies are the dictates of reason or the instincts of prudence; her laws are express revelations from heaven. Other societies exist for the good of man as a moral, social, political being; she exists for the glory of God in the salvation of sinners. Her ends are supernatural and Divine. She knows man and God only in the awful and profound relations implied in the terms guilt, sin, pardon, penitence, and eternal life. Existing in Christ, by Christ, and for Christ, she has no other law but His will. She can only speak the words which He puts in their mouth. Founded upon Divine revelation and not in human nature, she has a Divine faith but no human opinion, and the only argument by which she authenticates either her doctrines or her precepts is, Thus saith the Lord. Her province is not reason, but to testify. These principles, clear in themselves and as vital as they are clear, Dr. Breckinridge has unfolded with signal success; at the same time he has not overlooked the aspect of opposition in which her testimony must often place her to the institutions and customs of the world. Whenever earthly societies of any sort involve corrupt doctrines, it is her duty, in the name of God, to witness against the lie; but she can interfere no farther, except in relation to her own members, than to expose and rebuke the falsehood. When secular institutions involve no corrupt principles her position is one of silence in relation to them. As God has neither commanded nor prohibited them, she leaves them where He has left them— to the discretion of His children. The simple proposition that all Church-power is ministerial and declarative, consistently carried out, explains her whole duty. The meaning is, that the Church can only execute what God enjoins, and can teach as faith or duty only what God reveals...

It may be said that this conception of the province of the Church has never been adequately realized. This is only saying that she has never fully comprehended the liberty wherewith Christ has made her free. It was a slow process to cleanse off all the slime of the Papacy. The purest churches in Europe are still bungling about the question, perfectly simple to us, concerning the relations of the Church to the State. It is not strange that we should be perplexed about problems growing out of her peculiar posture in America as in one aspect a purely voluntary institution. In the mean time, God has been teaching us by disastrous examples. We have seen the experiment tried in certain quarters of

reducing the Church to the condition of a voluntary society, aiming at the promotion of universal good. We have seen her treated as a contrivance for every species of reform— individual, social, political. We have seen her foremost, under the plea of philanthropy, in every species of moral knight-errantry, from the harmless project of organizing the girls of a township into a pin-cushion club, to the formation of conspiracies for convulsing governments to their centre. The result has been precisely what might have been expected. Christ has been expelled from these pulpits, and almost the only Gospel which is left them is the gospel of the Age of Reason. **Extreme cases prove principles. If we would avoid a similar condemnation, we must hate even the garments spotted by the flesh; we must crush the serpent in the egg; we must rigidly restrain the Church within her proper sphere; and as she refines and exalts the spiritual nature of man, we may expect her to purify the whole moral atmosphere, and indirectly, through the life which she imparts to the soul, to contribute to the prosperity of every human interest. Her power in the secular sphere is that of a sanction and not a rule.**¹ (emphasis added)

For Thornwell and others of his ilk, the church is to do less not simply for the sake of doing less, but so that the gospel may remain front and center and the church receive divine power in its endeavors.

Over the years, however, there has been a growing chorus of voices who argue that not only *may* the church do more, it *must* do more; do *more than* work within the narrow set of parameters that were satisfactory for Presbyterians of previous generations. If the church and the gospel are to be relevant, engaging, and compelling, then they must do the very things which Thornwell deplored.

One might think that a confessional and constitutional church (that is, a church governed and defined by adopted confessional and constitutional standards) would have the matter resolved by its authoritative documents, if in fact the documents speak to the issue of the mission of the church. Ostensibly, we in the PCA believe that the church exists for “the gathering and perfecting of the saints” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*

1. James Henley Thornwell, "Theology as a Life in Individuals and in the Church," *Southern Presbyterian Review* (October 1859): 45-47.

XXV.3) and that the church courts (governing bodies) are to handle, or conclude nothing, but that which is ecclesiastical: and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth, unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary; or, by way of advice, for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate.” (WCF XXXI.4) Whatever this means, it certainly means that there are certain limitations upon the church’s mission. Furthermore, the PCA’s *Book of Church Order* stipulates that “The sole functions of the Church, as a kingdom and government distinct from the civil commonwealth, are to proclaim, to administer, and to enforce the law of Christ revealed in the Scriptures.” (BCO 3-4) Once again, the officer bearers of our church have professed subscription to a statement that restricts the legitimate activities of the church.

Now, I will be the first to grant that there are some (many?) in our denomination who either are not sufficiently familiar with and/or do not agree with these constitutional provisions related to the church’s mission. Yet I am also confident that there are a substantial number of ministers and elders who both understand and agree with these provisions, but who come to significantly different conclusions with respect to the church’s mission in the world. Why is this? What are the various contributing factors to these differences? In the remainder of this first chapter I would like to explore some of the factors that may account for this divergence of opinion.

The Distinction between Institution and Voluntary Association

A basic question has to do with whether the Christian church is an *institution* or a *voluntary association*. The former exists by God's design and fiat; the latter exists as an assembly designed and organized by man. The purpose of an institution will be defined and limited by God; the purpose of a voluntary association is left to the discretion of those who so associate with one another, provided that its purpose doesn't transgress the revealed will of God. Well, to ask the question is to answer it. It seems fairly obvious that *God* has instituted the Christian church; it is his idea, his design, his to do with as he pleases. Put negatively, the church did not come into existence at the initiative or by the devising of people. Like the gospel to which it gladly bears witness, the church's origins and purpose must be given their definition by God in his word.

Surely this has some bearing on the question of the church's mission. Is it conceivable that the church could exist by divine institution and yet not have a mission from God? Is it conceivable that God, having brought the church into existence, would give his people the ecclesiastical equivalent of a blank check when it comes to the church's mission in the world?

If the church is to be judged by its actions (and by its mission statements and its calendars), it would seem that a significant number of people, functionally, think of the church as a voluntary association. They think *and act* as if the church exists because of their intention to associate with one another. And, of course, if their desire is the impetus for the church's existence, it is not difficult to see that those same desires would shape and govern the church's mission.

This distinction between institution and voluntary association, while rather basic and arguably self-evident, does not appear to figure prominently in the thinking of many. It would seem that the default position of many is to think of the church as a voluntary association. . . which of course it is free to do, within the boundaries of biblical ethics, whatever its members would like to do.

The Missional Implications of Christ's Being

King and Head of the Church

Closely related to the distinction between an institution and a voluntary association are the implications of Christ's being king and head of the church for its mission. Assuming that being king and head has at least *something* to do with authority, something to do with the revelation of a sovereign will, should we not expect that to shape the church's mission? Are we to suppose that his kingship and headship have to do only with individual discipleship and not relate to corporate mission? If anything, it would seem that kingship and headship are more corporate than individual concepts and that we should expect that the church's sense of its mission, both what is prescribed and proscribed, would reflect Christ's kingly authority in some meaningful way. But it is to be wondered whether this consideration finds its way into people's thinking to any considerable degree.

The Regulative Principle and Mission

Broad and Narrow Construction

Those familiar with confessional Presbyterianism are familiar with the regulative principle of worship. It finds its classic confessional statement in *The Westminster Confession of Faith* XXI:1: “But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, *or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture.*” (italics added) Thinking in terms of the threefold distinction between the elements, circumstances, and forms (i.e., content) for worship, the regulative principle applies to the *elements alone*. The point being made is that, in order for an element (i.e., a distinct definable activity) to be included in worship, it must have positive divine prescription; it is not sufficient for the element in question merely to be not forbidden by God. Put another way, the church has no discretionary authority to invent elements of worship on the ground that they are “helpful” or “edifying.” It is not to be doubted, of course, that the church has discretionary power with respect to the circumstances and forms of worship. In fact, Westminster addresses the church’s discretionary power with respect to circumstances in the first chapter, the chapter on Holy Scripture: “that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.” While it is easy to caricature the regulative principle of worship (e.g., people asking questions such as “Where in the Bible does it say what kinds of chairs to

use or what time to meet?”), the position is in fact carefully nuanced and eminently implementable.

For our purposes, the question that comes to the fore is this: is there something analogous to the regulative principle of worship with respect to the church’s mission? Is the mission of the church so limited by God’s own revealed will that it may not be added to? That would seem to be the import of the constitutional statements cited above. In other words, it is not adequate to say “Nowhere does the Bible forbid this kind of activity as being part of the church’s mission, therefore it’s permissible.” What is needed is some sort of indication from God, either by expressed statement or good and necessary consequence, that he desires and commands a particular kind of activity. And even apart from the various biblical considerations that come into play, does not a regulative principle for the mission of the church just make sense in the nature of the case? How could we expect to have God’s blessing and protection in our endeavors as a church unless we have some reason to believe that we are being faithful to the stewardship that he has entrusted to us? Are we really willing to ground our justification for certain missional activities solely in the fact that people are helped, or that the church is growing, or any one of a number of other rationales that are often pleaded?

It should be acknowledged, of course, that this idea of a regulative principle for the church’s mission is *anything but* self-evident to the vast majority of Christians who profess to submit their lives to the authority of Scripture. Whether thinking of the church’s worship or its mission, my observation is that most biblically-minded Christians think and act as follows: *whatever is not forbidden is permitted*. As it pertains to worship, this approach is most commonly associated with historical Lutheranism over

against Calvinism. Yet it would seem unlikely that Protestant Evangelicalism has any sort of a conscious dependence upon a Lutheran approach to worship. It certainly makes one wonder what the factors are that contribute to the freedom that so many Christians believe they have to do, to put it somewhat pejoratively, what is right in their own eyes.

We should note, however, that it is important to distinguish between the regulative principle as such (whether its worship or mission version) and the degree to which one takes a minimalist approach to its application. In the matter of worship, for example, some assume that adherence to the regulative principle *necessarily implies* a stark, barren minimalism. . .as if the most imaginably austere version of Puritan worship is the logical outcome of a commitment to this understanding of worship. No—a fixed number of divinely-revealed elements of worship does not imply an austere minimalism. One can be perfectly committed to the regulative principle yet have a worship service that is very liturgically rich and full. The tendency of many to collapse and/or ignore this distinction has, unfortunately, given the regulative principle a rather poor reputation among many.

In addition to the general issue raised by the maximalist-minimalist spectrum as to how the regulative principle should be applied, there are several related questions. What constitutes positive divine warrant? How clearly and plainly does God's will need to be expressed? What threshold has to be reached in order for us to conclude that God has revealed something to us? What role do necessary consequences and legitimate inferences play? Certainly in the matter of worship, it is by ignoring these sorts of questions that the regulative principle is easily caricatured.

In the same way, if one were to be committed to a regulative principle of *mission*, and thereby to assert that the mission of the church is limited by God's revealed will, that does not necessarily imply some sort of anemic, truncated version of the church's activities; it would not imply, for example, that all the church does is preach sermons and do personal evangelism. It could just as likely be manifested as a rich, varied, creative, and multi-faceted engagement with the culture. So we should not assume that biblical limits upon the church's mission necessitate the marginalizing, irrelevance, and disengagement of the church. If a regulative principle with respect to mission is granted, it is a *separate question* as to what the church is authorized to do and how that authorization is to be ascertained.

The Distinction between the Church and Its Members

An important issue that comes into play in defining the church's mission is the degree to which it is important and meaningful to distinguish between the church's responsibility *qua* church and the responsibilities of its individual members (or in other associated capacities). Indeed, it may well be that a failure to make this distinction, a blurring of this line, significantly contributes to the confusion and disagreement on these issues. Part of people's inability to make the distinction is because they have no doctrine of the church, and a *de facto* low view of the visible church. For many, the church is simply of bunch of Christians considered together. As a result, it is hard to distinguish between different sets of responsibilities. And since people instinctively know that Christians are responsible to do all sorts of different things, they conclude that these responsibilities must find expression in the work and ministry of the local church. It is

not at all uncommon to find people who believe that, if something is good work, then the church ought to be doing it. But can this possibly be right? Are we really to believe that the church exists to do all the good that might be done, that it has no narrower focus?

One of the interesting inconsistencies that crops up in this regard concerns the contrasting views of general benevolences (doing good to people irrespective of religious confession) and politics. Most would agree (at least in my circles) that both are legitimate spheres of activity for the Christian. It is legitimate, even required, for the Christian to love his neighbor by meeting his needs. And it is legitimate for Christians to be politically active and engaged. Yet there is often an insistence that the church engage in general benevolences accompanied by an equally strong insistence that the church steer clear of politics and public policy. (I will note that this particular pairing of preferences is, in my experience, particularly common among young adults.) Why? Why the one and not the other? If the church is simply “a bunch of Christians,” it would seem as though both responsibilities could, with equal justification, devolve upon it.

While there may undoubtedly be the danger of drawing too sharp a line of demarcation between individual and ecclesiastical responsibilities, it seems that some sort of meaningful distinction along these lines is absolutely necessary. In its absence, the only alternative is for every conceivable activity in which the Christian might engage—everything from investment banking to teaching history to marine biology to small engine repair—could somehow become subsumed under the ministry of the church. In addition to robbing the church of any sort of distinctive flavor (the biblical concept of saltiness comes to mind), there would be the added problem of obliterating the distinction between the holy and the common. The fact that the Christian is called upon to engage in

common activities, i.e., activities which he shares in common with unbelievers, is an important dimension of life as a sojourner, as a pilgrim. To bring a significant number of those activities under the oversight and direction of the visible church can only foster Christians' being isolated from the people among whom they are called to live.

The above notwithstanding, it is undeniably the case that the church, in its function of making disciples, in its role of equipping the saints to be faithful, will have some role in preparing God's people to be marine biologists and small engine repairmen and bus drivers and attorneys to the glory of God. Part of what needs to be considered is this: how far and to what degree of specificity may the church go in preparing its members to serve in their various vocations? Training an attorney in the implications of keeping the ninth commandment is one thing; having legal services as a part of the church's ministry would be another. Helping a political candidate to think through the contours of personal integrity on the campaign trail is one thing; working with him or her to formulate particular policy positions is clearly another. It is important that, however the limited nature of the church's role is construed, it not result in a detached irrelevance that has no meaningful connections to people's vocational lives. But it is also important for the church, in its efforts to bring the word of God to bear upon people's vocational lives, not to become so involved that it, in effect, is taking on those vocations and conducting them in the name of Christ.

The Distinction between Ecclesiastical Texts and non-Ecclesiastical Texts

If it is valid to distinguish between the church's responsibilities and Christians' responsibilities, how do we ascertain which is which? Are there ecclesiastical texts which set forth the duties of church *qua* church and which are distinct from texts that set forth the duties of Christians? If so, by what criteria do we distinguish them? Is there a consistent hermeneutic that we can employ to make these distinctions in such a way that is not contrived and artificial? Certainly the instinct of most Christians (and, in my judgment, it is a correct instinct) is that the vast preponderance of injunctions in the New Testament are directed to Christians; that is to say, in their capacities as individual believers and applicable to the various relationships which they sustain. The question then becomes whether there are injunctions to people *other than* individual Christians generally considered. For example, when Paul exhorts Timothy to "preach the word" (2 Tim. 4:2), presumably this applies to gospel ministers, not all Christians. We could also think of injunctions addressed to various subsets (wives, husbands, children, masters, slaves) of the Christian community.

Can we read the New Testament and identify texts which define the church's mission over against the general responsibilities of Christians? And how would we go about identifying such texts? To cite one possible example, the Great Commission in Matthew 28 (the command to make disciples, etc.) may well fall into such a category. The Commission is given, of course, to the apostles. But its application must extend beyond them simply on the ground of the temporal extent mentioned: the "end of the age." So if it ultimately devolves upon some *in addition to* the apostles, upon whom does

it devolve? All Christians? Or, as seems more likely, the Christian church? Who succeeds the apostles? All Christians, or the officer-bearers of the church? It is by wrestling with texts like these that we may be able to identify the particular scope of the church's mission.

Factors other than Biblical Interpretation That May Account for One's Having a More Restrictive (or More Expansive) View of the Church's Mission

In our optimistic naiveté, we may assume that our views of the church's mission are based solely upon our (correct) reading of the biblical text. But surely there are other factors that come into play. Surely we have learned to read the biblical text selectively, even to blind ourselves to certain features. What are the preconceptions we bring to the text? How have we decided, in advance, what the church ought to be doing? How do considerations such as relevance and respectability and the fear of man come into play? Could it be, for example, that certain assumptions about what it means to make a difference in people's lives, in our community, lead us to have a more expansive view of the church's mission than we otherwise might? Are we driven by our congregants' sense of what we ought to be doing in our efforts to be relevant and to grow?

Conversely, perhaps our view of the church's mission is unduly narrow due to our aversion to "getting our hands dirty," to involvement in other people's lives in ways that may make us uncomfortable. Perhaps we have found it convenient to "hide behind" a ministry that consists only of preaching, teaching, and public worship, to remain in contexts that feel "safe." Who knows the degree to which vices such as fear, laziness, and selfishness shape our understanding of the church's mission?

One particular issue that arises in this connection is that of *race relations*. Our denomination has a particular history and evolved out of particular struggles and contexts. Especially with the PCA's origins as a Southern church, we cannot ignore epic events such as the Civil War and the civil rights movement. How has this long and difficult history affected our view of the church's mission? Specifically, has the church's relative disengagement from some of the great struggles in our country's history been the result of a biblically-based ecclesiology that antedated those struggles? Or were the peculiarities of the Southern church, particularly its doctrine of the spirituality of the church, crafted in an effort, whether intentional or unintentional, to insulate the church from these struggles? In this connection, Peter Slade's *Open Friendship in a Closed Society: Mission Mississippi and a Theology of Friendship* is a particularly illuminating and challenging study.

It is tempting and easy to approach the subject of the mission of the church from a detached academic perspective, as if we are able to engage such matters with a blissful, unadulterated objectivity. The fact of the matter is that, in our understanding and clarifying of the church's mission, we are affected by a whole host of factors. While there is no possibility of remaining unaffected, we can certainly be self-reflective and self-critical in our effort to hear the voice of the Lord of the church.

Charting a Course for This Study

While part of my interest in the church's mission is generic, my particular interest is the ongoing ministry of Trinity Presbyterian Church. What might, what *should*, our ministry look like if we attend carefully to the biblical extent and limits of the mission of the

church? The ultimate goal of this study is to evaluate our ministry in Providence in light of the conclusions at which we arrive to see what changes might be recommended to the session to promote a more faithful ministry.

With this in mind, my plan is to proceed as follows. In the second chapter, I will enumerate and evaluate some of the relevant bibliographic resources that contribute to a better understanding of the church's mission. This will, in the nature of the case, be highly selective but should provide something by way of historical and theological context.

In the third chapter, I will address some of the theological considerations that come into play when discussing the mission of the church and tend to shape one's views of the mission of the church.

The fourth chapter will consist of a set of theses on the mission of the church, a series of affirmations and denials. The goal will be to formulate these with sufficient generality as to be applicable to the Christian church at all times and in all places.

Finally, the fifth chapter will seek to bring the theses from Chapter 4 to bear on the ministry at Trinity in Providence. I want to evaluate what we are currently doing as a church, to see what we need to eliminate, what we need to add—in general, what we need to change in order to fulfill Christ's commission to us in our particular cultural context. My hope is to be to some significant degree imaginative and aspirational; not simply seeing the church that *is* but also the church that might be, that could be. If, several years after the completion of this dissertation, the ministry of Trinity Presbyterian Church is more fully reflective of the revealed will of the great King and Head of the church, and,

subservient to that, if the dreams expressed herein today become the realities of tomorrow, then the effort will have been well worth it.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature bearing upon the question of the extent and limits of the mission of the church is potentially unmanageably vast. The most anyone could hope to tackle is some sort of representative list. What I endeavor to do in this chapter is provide the reader with a selective, cross-sectional, and intentionally cursory orientation to and evaluation of some of the resources of particular interest to those within the Reformed Evangelical community. While more in-depth analysis of some of these resources would be desirable in and of itself, I am seeking to touch on as many resources as I can within a chapter of reasonable length. Additionally, there are many resources outside the scope of this inquiry that would be of value in thinking through the church's mission. But since this is, after all, to some degree an intramural discussion and debate, it is perhaps best to focus on resources within our own broad theological tradition.

Since I minister in the Presbyterian Church in America, the majority of the resources arise out of the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition. I make no apology for this, in part because my study is designed to explore the church's mission within the framework of a Presbyterian ecclesiology. What may, what *should* we do within the parameters of our church's constitution? I want to tap into the breadth and depth of our tradition's reflection on the mission of the church as part of my effort to help my congregation fulfill its mission. At the same time, I am aware of the fact that our tradition has its blind spots. Thus we want to be open to resources outside of our tradition that can appropriately challenge it.

While it may seem to be a somewhat unlikely starting point, a particularly fruitful period of time is the American Civil War. Presbyterian resources from this era are significant for a couple of reasons. First, the severity of the conflict forced Presbyterians to think through the church's mission in ways they would not have otherwise. Second, the ethos of 19th century American Presbyterianism contributes rather directly to the Presbyterian Church in America.

A case can be made that a certain pride of place should be given to Stuart Robinson's *The Church of God as an Essential Element of the Gospel*.¹ Laboring as a border state pastor, there is a sense in which Robinson "caught it from both sides," feeling pressure from both the Union and the Confederacy. As a result, he sets forth a careful and nuanced argument for the spirituality of the church, that is that the church exists solely for the purpose of making disciples. One of Robinson's goals is to demonstrate that this particular view of the church's mission is not a novelty based on the exigencies of the war, but rather one that has deep roots in the history and tradition of the Reformed church (a goal which I believe he meets). To this end there is a lengthy appendix consisting of primary sources to make the case, representing a good gateway to earlier Reformed thinkers.

1. Stuart Robinson, *The Church of God As An Essential Element of the Gospel, and the Idea, Structure, and Functions Thereof: A Discourse in Four Parts. With an Appendix, Containing the More Important Symbols of Presbyterian Church Government, Historically Arranged and Illustrated* (Philadelphia: Joseph M. Wilson, 1858).

In connection with Robinson, mention should be made of Preston Graham's recent *A Kingdom Not of This World*.² Graham does the reader the service not only of assessing Robinson's thought within his cultural context but also of providing, at the end of the book, a Robinson reader consisting of some well-chosen selections from Robinson's other works. Graham's work is especially helpful in assessing certain 20th century writers who tend to argue that Robinson's view was a novelty precipitated by the demands of the war, specifically to insulate Presbyterians from addressing the evils of slavery. This general issue—namely the charge that a narrow view of the church's mission is simply a pretext for the church's avoiding and evading its God-given responsibilities—is a thread that runs through the 20th century and into the 21st, especially in connection with the church's role in combating racial injustice.

If Robinson is a voice from a border state, James Henley Thornwell is a respected voice from the Southern states.³ In his collected writings, there are a number of essays that articulately and forcefully set forth a view of the church's mission that is limited to the making of disciples. While Thornwell's voice should be heard, it will need to be heard with especially critical ears. One cannot help but wonder the degree to which Thornwell's views were shaped by the raging debates of his day and, therefore, reflect the attendant blind spots. By my reading, there is somewhat less consistent and rigorous application of the spirituality doctrine than one finds in Robinson, and perhaps more of a tendency to countenance the church's being involved in the civil sphere when it suited

2. Preston D. Graham, Jr., *A Kingdom Not of This World: Stuart Robinson's Struggle to Distinguish the Sacred from the Secular during the Civil War* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2002).

3. James Henley Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974).

Thornwell's purpose. This too is a pattern to which we need to be alert in the generations that followed: selectivity and gerrymandering in the application of the church's mission. If and when we find apologists for a particular view of the church's mission who apply it with rigorous consistency and neutrality, we should perhaps pay more careful attention than we would to those who are less consistent.

Another voice from this era which commands our attention is that of Thomas Peck. Most significant for our purposes is his volume *Notes on Ecclesiology*.⁴ Also worth consulting is the essay "Church and State," originally published in the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, October 1863 and now found in his collected writings.⁵ Peck is a particularly clear thinker and writer, and, from my reading, is perhaps the best spokesman for the spirituality of the church from the vantage point of Southern Presbyterianism. I think that Peck, more than his contemporaries, is able to speak into the debates of the 21st century.

Rounding things out from the perspective of the Northern church, Charles Hodge is worth consulting. His brief essay "The Relation of Church and State"⁶ bears a certain relation to the topic. But what is perhaps most interesting and instructive for our purposes is Hodge's well-known opposition to the Gardiner Spring Resolutions. These resolutions, having the effect of committing the Presbyterian Church to the Union cause,

4. Thomas E. Peck, *Notes on Ecclesiology* (Taylors, SC: Presbyterian Press, 2005).

5. Thomas E. Peck, *The Writings of Thomas E. Peck* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1999).

6. Charles Hodge, "The Relation of Church and State," In *The Reformation of the Church*, ed. Iain H. Murray (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth, 1965).

provoked in Hodge decided opposition. He argued that the church had clearly overstepped its God-ordained bounds; and, in so doing, reasoned in a manner largely consistent with his Southern and border state counterparts.

One of the best general resources for exploring how the mission of the church was understood by 19th century Presbyterians is David F. Coffin's annotated bibliography "Selected Readings on the Presbyterian Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church,"⁷ some of which has been incorporated into my bibliography.

In my estimation it is also useful to survey the thinking of writers contemporaneous with 19th century American Presbyterians who, while thinking deeply about ecclesiology, were at a distance from the American conflict. To the extent that such thinkers align with their American counterparts on the limits of the mission of the church, it supports the notion that such views were not bald and unabashed fabrications devised merely to defend a particular position in the context of the Civil War. I have in mind in particular James Bannerman's *The Church of Christ*⁸ and D. Douglas Bannerman's *The Scripture Doctrine of the Church*.⁹ Considered together, these writings of father and son constitute a significant representation of the views of ripened Scottish Presbyterianism. While the latter volume focuses more on particular texts of Scripture

7. David F. Coffin, "Selected Readings on the Presbyterian Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church," Spring 2003, accessed September 1, 2016, <http://www.newhopefairfax.org/files/spiritualityofchurchreadings.pdf>.

8. James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church* (Great Britain: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960).

9. Douglas D. Bannerman, *The Scripture Doctrine of the Church Historically and Exegetically Considered* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976).

that contribute to our view of the church, the former takes a more synthetic/systematic approach. Especially germane to the question of the church's mission is James Bannerman's discussion of church power (vol. 1, pp. 187ff). Also worth consulting from this period of time is the section on the church in Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*.¹⁰

It is frequently claimed that the understanding of the church's mission promulgated by many Presbyterians in the 19th century was driven by the issues surrounding the Civil War. Specifically, it is claimed that the doctrine of the spirituality of the church was fabricated out of whole cloth to justify the church's not engaging on the issue of slavery. For this reason it will be instructive to consult Reformed and Presbyterian writings prior to the 19th century and ask this question: is the spirituality doctrine a 19th century novelty? Or does it have clear antecedents in the Reformed tradition? Of course, Stuart Robinson was one who undertook the burden of demonstrating the latter, referring as he does to the "Scoto-American theory."

There are many Reformation and Reformed sources that might come to mind and be brought to bear. But to a large degree the writings that are most important to review in this regard are the Westminster standards. This is due both to the fact that the standards serve as part of the constitution of the church and to the fact that the doctrinal positions outlined in the standards are broadly reflective of the consensus of the Reformed church in the 17th century. Of specific interest is the statement in Chapter 25 "Of the Church," paragraph 3: "Unto this catholic visible Church Christ has given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, **for the gathering and perfecting of the saints**, in this life, to the

10. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

end of the world: and does, by His own presence and Spirit, according to His promise, make them effectual thereunto.” (emphasis added) It is terribly significant that in this, the Confession’s only statement as to the church’s mission, it is very simply set forth in terms of the gathering and perfecting of the saints. Now this, of course, leaves open what is meant by gathering and perfecting and what are legitimate and illegitimate methods of gathering and perfecting. But it should be reasonably plain that any activity that may not be fairly regarded as gathering and/or perfecting is outside of the constitutional parameters of the church’s mission. An additional significant statement, this time couched negatively, is found in XXXI.4: “Synods and councils are to handle, or conclude nothing, but that which is ecclesiastical: and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth, unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary; or, by way of advice, for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate.” Again, there will be understandable debate as to what constitutes a “case extraordinary,” or what exactly is meant by “intermeddling.” But, however the statement is to be construed, it is clearly limiting not merely what the church *concludes*, but even what it *handles*, to the ecclesiastical sphere. Therefore whatever falls outside of the ecclesiastical sphere is not the proper business of the Christian church (though it may well be the business of Christian people as individuals or in other associated capacities). Surely “civil affairs which concern the commonwealth” is a phrase which covers a great range of activities, and very important activities at that. But, according to the Confession of Faith, they are not the province of the church. One wonders how the calls for cultural engagement, the doing of social justice, and the like square with the forceful proscriptions of the Confession. One also wonders if those who

are committed to the various doctrines of the Confession—its views of justification and sanctification, its understanding of the divine decree, its exposition of the covenants of works and grace—are both conversant with and committed to the Confession’s doctrine of the mission of the church. Though the textual space allocated to the issue is minimal, the Confession nonetheless seems to be quite clear. Why has this been neglected to the degree that it has among present-day confessional Presbyterians?

While we are on the topic of constitutional standards, mention should be made of books of order. For example, *The Book of Church Order* of the Presbyterian Church in America addresses the church’s mission in a manner that is consistent with *The Westminster Confession*. In describing the kingship of Jesus Christ, we are told that “Christ, as King, has given to His Church officers, oracles and ordinances; and especially has He ordained therein His system of doctrine, government, discipline and worship, all of which are either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary inference may be deduced therefrom; **and to which things He commands that nothing be added, and that from them naught be taken away**” (Preface I, emphasis added). Such language militates against the church’s having discretionary power as to how its mission shall be defined. In Chapter 1, Section 2 we find that the church’s mission is defined with the same categories we found in the *Confession*: “The Church which the Lord Jesus Christ has erected in this world for the gathering and perfecting of the saints is His visible kingdom of grace, and is one and the same in all ages.” And in Chapter 3, which has to do with the nature and extent of church power, we find a number of pertinent statements. “The sole functions of the Church, as a kingdom and government distinct from the civil commonwealth, are to proclaim, to administer, and to enforce the law of Christ revealed

in the Scriptures.” “The Church, with its ordinances, officers and courts, is the agency which Christ has ordained for the edification and government of His people, for the propagation of the faith, and for the evangelization of the world” (Chapter 3, Section 5). These kinds of statements, taken in the aggregate, certainly suggest a view of the church’s mission which is “no more, no less,” i.e., a definition of mission which is fixed by Christ himself, to which the church is not at liberty to add and from which it is not at liberty to detract.

To cite but one additional example, similar language is found in the *Book of Church Order* of The Orthodox Presbyterian Church. For example, “The work of the church, in fellowship with and obedience to Christ, is divine worship, mutual edification, and gospel witness” (Chapter 2, Section 4). “A particular form of church government is bound to set forth what Christ requires for the order of his church and to arrange particular circumstances only in the manner, to the degree, and for the purposes that the Lord of the church has appointed in Scripture” (Chapter 1, Section 3).

Needless to say, different people construe the authority of constitutional documents in different ways. But for those who view them, not simply as additional resources replete with pious advice, but as sets of provisions the church’s office bearers have sworn to uphold, they will need to take a pride of place second only to Scripture. I wonder how many pastors, elders, church planters, and missionaries sit down and ask the questions, “How does our constitution, concerning which we have taken vows, define our mission? What is included? What, by implication, is excluded?”

An important figure for our purposes in the early 20th century is J. Gresham Machen. While Machen was dealing with a very different set of issues than his

Presbyterian forebears, he ends up articulating a view of the spirituality of the church that is strikingly similar. Eschewing both the social gospel of Protestant liberalism and the political arm-twisting of early Fundamentalism, Machen is something of a standard bearer for the spirituality of the church as it found expression in the early 20th century. There are several essays which serve to set forth Machen's view of the church's mission, including "The Mission of the Church," "The Responsibility of the Church in Our New Age," and "Statement on the Eighteenth Amendment." These and other essays are conveniently collected in *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writings*.¹¹

A legitimate heir to Machen and a faithful proponent of the positions he espoused is D.G. Hart. Hart, a historian who currently teaches at Hillsdale College, has explored the evolution and development of Evangelicalism in the 20th century often with special reference to trends within conservative Presbyterianism. In addition to a brief article on the spirituality of the church,¹² Hart has written a number of books which bear on the topic of the church's mission, especially in its present American context. These include *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America*,¹³ *A Secular Faith: Why Christianity Favors the Separation of*

11. D.G. Hart, ed., *J. Gresham Machen: Selected Shorter Writings* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2004).

12. D.G. Hart and John R. Muether, "The Spirituality of the Church," *Ordained Servant* 7, no. 3 (July 1998): 64-66.

13. D.G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 1994).

Church and State,¹⁴ *Seeking a Better Country: 300 Years of American Presbyterianism*,¹⁵ and several others. Hart is particularly alert to Presbyterianism's historic understanding of the church's mission and how cultural forces have impacted that understanding over the years.

Edmund Clowney is another voice that needs to be heard in this discussion. Part of his significance consists of the irenic tone which he was always able to strike and the fact that he was and is held in high regard by virtually all within our tradition. Clowney's *The Church*¹⁶ and his essay "The Politics of the Kingdom"¹⁷ are both worth reading in one's efforts to assess the proper role of the church in the broader culture. Another work from the mid-20th century is that J.H. Bavinck. His classic work on missiology¹⁸ is a standard in Reformed circles.

While it may seem only tangentially related to the issue at hand, I think Meredith Kline's *Kingdom Prologue*¹⁹ belongs in the discussion and is worth reading. Kline's analysis of the distinctions between cult and culture, between sacred and profane, are

14. Darryl Hart, *A Secular Faith: Why Christianity Favors the Separation of Church and State* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006).

15. D.G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking a Better Country: 300 Years of American Presbyterianism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2007).

16. Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

17. Edmund P. Clowney, "The Politics of the Kingdom" *Westminster Theological Journal* 41 (Spring 1979): 291-310.

18. J.H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960).

19. Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006).

quite profound and far-reaching in their implications. And, for some of our other writers, it is really Kline who provides the theoretical infrastructure for much of what they write. Not to be ignored in this connection is the obscure yet fascinating minority report (to the General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1964) on the issue of medical missionaries.²⁰ Here Kline makes a very forceful and cogent argument against medical missions and missionaries *in the sense of* those who would operate under the auspices of the visible church. The significance of this little piece is that it evaluates a very obvious deed of mercy (medicine) in light of the church's mission.

If the slavery issue served as a flash point for the mission of the church in the 19th century, the same could be said of civil rights in the mid 20th century. It can hardly be coincidental that some Presbyterian churches declined to enter into the fray of segregation and related issues on the ground that such engagement would violate the spirituality doctrine. One work that explores this in some detail is Peter Slade's *Open Friendship in a Closed Society: Mission Mississippi and a Theology of Friendship*.²¹ While much of the book focuses on the positive effect of building individual bridges between blacks and whites, it also suggests that the spirituality doctrine was used as an excuse for the church not to speak prophetically to one of the great issues of the day. Slade in effect raises the same point that people raise about 19th century Presbyterians: is the doctrine of the spirituality of the church a manufactured doctrine that provides people with an easy excuse not to get involved? And even if it is not a doctrine of recent

20. Meredith G. Kline, "Minority Report, Committee on Foreign Missions." *Presbyterian Guardian* 33 (May-June 1964): 81-82.

21. Peter. Slade, *Open Friendship in a Closed Society: Mission Mississippi and a Theology of Friendship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

vintage, is there a sense in which is too convenient, too facilitating of the church's steering clear of the significant issues of the day? This book hits particularly close to home for those in the Presbyterian Church in America as it deals with the relatively recent history of some of our more prominent churches and ministers.

From within our own tradition a significant recent work is Sean Michael Lucas' *For a Continuing Church: The Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America*²² along with a more narrowly-focused article on the spirituality of the church.²³ Lucas appears to be a proponent of the spirituality of the church, a limited view of its mission finding deep roots in the Reformation. But he also argues that many in our Southern Presbyterian tradition misused and misapplied the spirituality doctrine, and sinfully so, in their treatment of black people in the decades leading up to and including the Civil Rights Era. Lucas, in the leadership role he has exercised in helping the Presbyterian Church in America to acknowledge the sins of both past and present, has something of a unique voice in addressing matters related to the church's mission.

Among the more significant contemporary authors writing on the church's mission, especially in an urban context, is Tim Keller. Keller is, of course, well known in evangelical Presbyterian circles for his advocacy of the church's having a word and deed ministry that ministers to the whole person. Certainly his recent volume *Generous Justice*²⁴ is important in this regard. But most significant is Keller's 2012 book *Center*

22. Sean Michael Lucas, *For a Continuing Church: The Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2015).

23. Sean Michael Lucas, "Owning Our Past: The Spirituality of the Church in History, Failure, and Hope," *Reformed Faith & Practice* 1, no. 1 (May 2016): 25-38.

24. Timothy J. Keller, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012).

Church,²⁵ an extremely comprehensive and thought-provoking work on what the mission of the church ought to look like in an urban context. Based on my reading, I would say that *Center Church* provides the most thoughtful and cogent challenge to a narrow construction of the church's mission yet available. More so than in his previous writings, Keller seems conversant with the distinction between the church *qua* church and the church as a collection of individuals; he readily grants that the organizational church does not have as part of its mission all that individual Christians are called to do. This opens the possibility for some sort of rapprochement between Keller's understanding of the church's mission and that of more traditional advocates of the spirituality doctrine.

The strain of contemporary Reformed thinking that, in my judgment, provides the best conceptual framework for a more limited view of the church's mission is the Two Kingdoms (2K) view. One of the best starting points to explore 2K is David VanDrunen's *Living in God's Two Kingdoms*.²⁶ This is a very clear and cogent presentation of what it means to live simultaneously as members of two kingdoms, one holy and one common, and how the responsibilities of the Christian church are to be distinguished from the various cultural endeavors that Christians share in common with unbelievers. Also of significance is VanDrunen's *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms*.²⁷ More of a historical study, this volume traces the rootedness of natural law thinking

25. Timothy J. Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012).

26. David VanDrunen, *Living in God's Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010).

27. David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

within Reformed thought (it is supposed by many that Reformed folk have no use for natural law) and its bearing on whether or not there is a common culture *which is supposed to remain common*. One of the lines of thought that contributes to a broader construction of the church's mission is the notion that the church has a role in *transforming the culture*. This is particularly evident in the world-and-life view rhetoric of the neo-Kuyperians. VanDrunen does an excellent job of demonstrating how, up through Kuyper himself, there was an understanding of the reality of a common cultural enterprise and, consequently, particular contours and limits to the church's mission. Kuyper's disciples, however, in their enthusiasm for the culturally transformative work of the Christian church, became much more reluctant to place limits on the church's mission.

A work that addresses our question most directly is Kevin DeYoung's and Greg Gilbert's *What Is the Mission of the Church?*²⁸ It may be that, of all the resources currently available, this book hits on the issues that will be most germane and relevant to confessional Presbyterians. This is especially true with respect to concerns for the poor and for social justice. The more that such issues are appropriately embraced by evangelicals, the more we will have to think through the role of the church.

D.A. Carson's *Christ and Culture Revisited*²⁹ makes a helpful contribution to the discussion by reviving H. Richard Niebuhr's classic taxonomy and evaluating both it and

28. Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011).

29. D.A Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

current approaches to cultural engagement. Carson's work and Keller's analysis in *Center Church* provide a helpful grid by which to evaluate various approaches to the mission of the church.

There are a couple of books by David Wells which contribute significantly to our thinking about the church's mission. *No Place for Truth*³⁰ and *God in the Wasteland*,³¹ taken together, speak of the evacuation of theological reflection from the evangelical enterprise. A point that Wells makes that is especially important for our purposes is that the danger from the activist right is just as great as the danger from the activist left. Many evangelicals can see with clarity how the emphases of the theological left resulted in a compromise, even abandonment, of the gospel. But ironically, they turn right around and embrace the causes of the right, which are no less inimical to the gospel. To be sure, evangelicals, and evangelical Presbyterians in particular, have changed their emphases since Wells' indictments of almost twenty years ago. Still, one has to wonder whether what some construe as part of the church's mission may ultimately undermine the proclamation of the gospel.

James Davis Hunter's *To Change the World*³² is an important recent work that ought to temper any expectations the church will be able significantly to change the culture. It is interesting how, after several decades of *attempting* to change the culture,

30. David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

31. David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

32. James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

there really isn't much evidence that it has been changed. Especially intriguing is Hunter's concept of "faithful presence within." It raises the question of the church's fulfilling its mission by simply *being* the church, *existing* within a particular culture and living out lives as faithful disciples. With the emphasis on programmatic approaches, vision casting, and the like, perhaps our greatest effectiveness will come from simply acting like God's people in full view of the world.

A number of authors mentioned adopt a Two Kingdoms approach to the church's mission. As this is the direction in which I am inclined anyway, I want to surround myself with some constructive critiques. Keller does this to a degree. But perhaps as good a starting point as any is Dan Strange's "Not Ashamed! The Sufficiency of Scripture for Public Theology."³³ While Strange does not address the mission of the church as such (his concern is the more general question of the usefulness of Scripture for public questions and issues), his contrasting evaluations of Common Kingdom and Confessional Kingdom models can be helpful in thinking through the views of the church's mission which tend to be associated with each approach. Also, a useful repository of resources on 2K, both defenses and critiques, may be found at <http://bensonian.org/2011/08/11/resources-on-two-kingdoms-theology-defenses-and-critiques>.

These, then, are some of the resources that will prove to be of help in defining the mission of the church, its extent and limits, within the framework of a Presbyterian

33. Dan Strange, "Not Ashamed! The Sufficiency of Scripture for Public Theology," Themelios 36, no. 2 (August 2011): 238-260, accessed September 1, 2016, <http://themelios.thegospelcoalition.org/article/not-ashamed-the-sufficiency-of-scripture-for-public-theology>.

ecclesiology. While it is unavoidably a highly selective list, it does cover a fairly representative range of thinking on the mission of the church as found within our circles.

CHAPTER 3

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

I have always been intrigued by questions that represent the busy intersection, the dense clustering, of a variety of theological issues. Take, for example, the question of whether the Christian is at liberty to consume alcoholic beverages. While certainly quaint and arcane sounding in the early 21st century, at one time this was a topic of lively discussion; and is still in some circles today. Interestingly, it is not merely a topic unto itself. It has a way of pulling into its orbit the following dimensions of biblical ethics and theology: the goodness of the created order (and whether *things* can cause us to sin), the origin of sin, the sufficiency of Scripture, the scope of church authority, the nature of human responsibility (both for one's own actions and the actions of others), liberty of conscience, and the whole question of the appropriateness of a disease model in assessing the abuse of alcohol and the bearing such a model has on the question of moral responsibility. Like so many ethical and theological issues, the consumption of alcohol is an intersection issue, requiring one to be conversant with and engage quite a number of related issues.

Similarly, the issue of the extent and limits of the mission of the church represents the intersection of a whole host of discrete theological issues. The conclusions one reaches on those issues, or, conversely, the degree to which one is not even aware of such issues, will shape significantly one's views of the church's mission. More broadly, I suspect that much of what is controversial in the life and ministry of the church involves interesting intersections; and that much of the controversy, the sharp differences of

opinion, can be attributed to making too much of some of the intersecting “lines” and too little of others.

This chapter considers some of the more significant issues, but not all, that influence and inform how we think through our construction of the church’s mission. While it represents the current state of my reflection, I should note that my thinking on some of these issues continues to evolve and that is manifested in tentativeness at some points. When the reader gets to Chapter 4, s/he will notice some overlap in content. This is by design as the theses on the church’s mission will make use of the matters contained in this chapter.

The Nature of Scriptural Authority

Of fundamental significance to our understanding of the church’s mission is our source (or sources) of authority. Clearly, doing what is right in our own eyes differs from doing what God calls us to do. And meeting the demands of the ecclesiastical consumer differs from meeting the demands of the divine lawgiver. And doing what works (or what appears to work) differs from doing what is right.

This project is not aimed at those who make their appeal to human authorities. The tendency of human authorities is to follow “every wind of doctrine,” to be characterized by various fads and fashions, and to be more interested in the time-bound vicissitudes of “what’s trending” than in any sure and timeless word from heaven. Instead, this project seeks to gain the listening ear of those who regard Holy Scripture as having a unique and ultimate authority. Of special interest are those who believe in what can be fairly regarded as a historic Protestant view of the Bible and its role in our lives.

When our *Westminster Confession* asserts that “the whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture,” we view it as asserting something concerning which there ought to be broad Protestant consensus. It goes without saying, of course, that the life and mission of the church, that society created by the death and resurrection of Christ, would fall within the purview set forth above.

An interesting inconsistency among some within Protestant Evangelicalism is the untethering of certain aspects of faith and life from the authority of God's word. One example that comes to mind is aesthetics. It is interesting, to say the least, that those who are convinced that there are *moral* absolutes and that there are *doctrinal* absolutes should be such staunch proponents of aesthetic relativism. . .as if the true and the good are clearly matters about which God has something to say but the beautiful is not. Should not our working assumption be that, however difficult they may be to discern and articulate, there are such things as aesthetic absolutes?

Even more suspect is the belief—sometimes explicitly held, sometimes implicitly assumed—that the church has the liberty to prosecute its mission however it sees fit, to do what it wants. As long as people are being helped, good is being promoted, and biblical ideals are being pursued, anything is fair game. This of course touches upon the question, addressed in the next chapter, of whether there is a regulative principle of *mission* just as there is a regulative principle of *worship*. For now, however, we simply note that it is a seeming inconsistency for people be so committed to the biblical view of, say, the atonement, or sexual ethics, or the bodily resurrection, yet be apparently and

blithely unconcerned about what the Bible says about the church's mission. Since Jesus is the one who builds his church, and since he builds it upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, is it not self-evident that he, through his word, will have something to say as to *how* it is to be built? What kind of an architect and builder would leave his masterpiece entirely to the preferences and whims of others? Certainly not an all-wise, infallible one.

Thus even as there are *moral* absolutes and *doctrinal* absolutes, and even as there are *aesthetic* absolutes, we should expect that there are *mission* absolutes, ways in which God through his word regulates and directs the church's mission. To anticipate something of the discussion in the next chapter, this is not to suggest that there is some sort of divine "script," as though there were a set of blueprints or a how-to manual delivered from heaven. To assert that the authority of God's word has a bearing on the mission of the church is to say nothing, as such, about how finely tuned such authority might be. In and of itself, God's authority with respect to the mission of the church leaves ample and abundant room for innovation, imagination, and adaptation to the exigencies of culture. And certainly the revealed will of God does not deny the existence of "some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed." (*Westminster Confession of Faith* I.6) This suggestive language, as applied to the church's mission, helps guard against the caricature of a regulated mission that is overly specific and unworkable.

The Nature of the Church

Individual and Corporate Responsibility

One's thinking about what the church *is* will clearly impact one's thinking about what the church *does*. It is to be wondered, however, how much thought has been given to the nature of the church. Unlike previous eras of the church, ours is not known for one that gives sustained attention to matters of ecclesiology. As a consequence, one of the distinctions that get blurred is that between the church as *organization* and the church as *organism*; or the church as visibly organized society and the church as Christian people informally considered.

No one doubts that Christian people have a very broad range of responsibilities and that the Christian may lawfully engage in a myriad of activities. No one would dream of delimiting the mission of the church *if the church is conceived of as Christians informally considered*. May Christians support a particular candidate for President? May Christians form political advocacy groups? May Christians build hospitals, establish homeless shelters, or provide low income housing? We could fill page after page of this thesis with hundreds upon hundreds of activities, political, benevolent, and otherwise, concerning which there should be no questions or reservations whatsoever. *No one doubts this*, and it would be to erect a straw man to suggest otherwise.

But then what happens is this: there is equivocation on what is meant by the church. Or there is no recognition of the different senses in which the word "church" may be used, either biblically or in our theological vernacular. And people take certain activities and responsibilities that are well within the range of responsibility of *Christian people* and suggest that they are within the range of responsibility of the visible church as

an organized, governed society. Now, of course, most activities do not even come under consideration. But a considerable number do, ranging from the benevolent to the political, the aesthetic to the athletic. Churches do, in fact, sponsor benevolent programs and host political rallies. Churches do, in fact, offer concerts and sports camps. Churches plan, sponsor, and support all sorts of activities that are perfectly legitimate ones in which Christians may engage. But, by failing to distinguish between the different senses in which “church” is understood, they bring more and more under the tent of the visible, organized church. . .under its oversight and supported by its resources.

As one considers the various admonitions and exhortations of the New Testament, the validity of these sorts of distinctions should be apparent, though to be sure there will be instances of ambiguity. There are ethical imperatives directed to God’s people in general: bearing with one another, forgiving one another, loving one another, not being conformed to this world. There are ethical imperatives directed to certain subsets of God’s people: husbands, wives, parents, children, masters, slaves, ministers, elders. In these instances, hopefully one does not believe that a moral obligation is present when no such obligation exists (due to the fact that one is not part of the group in view). This is not to deny the possibility of remote, oblique applications, in which I, though not part of the group addressed in the biblical text, nonetheless glean something about my responsibilities. In this sense, all of God’s word is for all of God’s people. Yet there can be no gainsaying the fact that there are certain portions of Scripture that address certain people to the exclusion of others. And that has a bearing on who is responsible for what.

Particularly significant for our purposes is the existence of texts that touch upon the responsibility, not of this or that individual or group of individuals, but of the church

as a whole, responsibilities that devolve upon the church in its capacity of an organized society under the oversight of elders. For example, take the keys of the kingdom of heaven, the authority to bind and loose to which Jesus refers in Matthew 16. Assuming that this has ongoing application beyond the apostolic era, is it not most likely that the responsibility does not devolve upon Christians in general but upon the church? More will be said about this in the next chapter. For now I merely want the reader to see that this distinction for which I am arguing, that between individual responsibility and corporate responsibility, is not some artificial contrivance and construct imposed upon the biblical text. Rather, it is a meaningful distinction arising naturally out of the biblical text.

Interestingly, many times when one questions the propriety of the church's assuming responsibilities that properly belong to the individual, one is accused of lacking appropriate concern. "Don't you care about the poor? Don't you know how important the arts are in reaching people? Don't you care about the decline and direction of our culture? Why aren't you willing to take a stand on the great issues of our day?" So those who recognize more of a clear line of demarcation between the two ways in which the church can be understood are thought to be dismissive of and unconcerned about many things that are in fact quite important. But nothing could be further from the truth. Those who see more clearly the lines of demarcation simply want to see the abundance of worthy activities pursued by Christians without the direct oversight of the visible church.

I would take things one step further. Using a broader understanding of the church to inform its mission, there is an inevitable—to say nothing of an ironic—disparaging and devaluing of the wide array of activities that never get brought under the church's

ministry umbrella. How so? If a particular church does more rather than less by way of activities which constitute its mission, then it implicitly places value upon that which is included. But the more indiscriminate and broad the church is by way of what is included, the more one is led to wonder about the value of what is *not* included. For example, a church which places a very narrow construction on its understanding of mission (limited to, say, a ministry of word and sacrament and evangelistic outreach), is not really making any negative value judgments about the myriad of activities and ministries in which it chooses not to engage. All of the various worthy endeavors that are not part of the church's mission are worth pursuing by individual or otherwise associated Christians. In this sense, the Christian church is an equal opportunity *excluder*.

However, to the extent that the church is *more* inclusive by way of that which it undertakes, it ends up making value judgments in what it includes and what it excludes. In other words, the more a church veers toward the position of undertaking the doing of good in the world, the more it sees itself as a vehicle and a medium through and in which worthy pursuits (benevolent, artistic, athletic, political, etc.) will find expression, the more it ends up disparaging those endeavors that are excluded. Why is this the case? Because it is a reflection of the church's priorities, that which it deems more important and that which it deems less important. If all manner of do-goodism is fair game for the church, then the making of a negative value judgment seems inevitable in those instances in which the church refuses to incorporate something into its ministry. In the absence of some principled reason for exclusion, such as is found in the narrower construction of the church's ministry, the message is sent that a significant number of activities are not worth

the effort and trouble. And, this message having been sent and received, the members of the church do not have adequate incentive to pursue such things on their own. This is especially the case in larger churches with greater resources since the matter of budget constraints is not as plausible a reason as to why something is not pursued.

To return to the church that does less rather than more, by doing less it is in a better position than it would be otherwise to elevate the significance of the many good things believers may do with their time and resources. By including *none* of these activities as part of its mission, it exhibits no prejudice against any of them. And the church thus finds itself in the enviable position of being able to commend to its members a broad and diverse range of ways they can be active and useful in the world.

I should say that I am not unsympathetic to the concern that some may raise that this distinction between individual and corporate responsibility is too clever by half, and that by not allowing things to be more fluid and undefined one runs the risk of paralysis and the stifling of initiative. Let me be very clear: the very last thing I would want to see, in my congregation or any other, is vigorous, expansive, heart-felt ministry becoming the casualty of some “theory” regarding the church’s mission. I suppose, though, it is like so many other things in the life of the church. There are biblical principles to be recognized. But there are also issues of pastoral application and pastoral care. The contentions of this project, to whatever extent they have merit, will need to be implemented by wise and prudent shepherds of the flock, shepherds who will be responsible to ensure that paralysis and the stifling of initiative do not take root.

The importance of this distinction between individual and corporate responsibility cannot be overstated. For example, when I read the Great Commission in my Bible as an

individual Christian, it could be very daunting indeed, what with its references to making disciples of *all nations* and teaching them to observe “all that I have commanded.” How could I, as an individual, possibly do that? But then I notice that this is a command given to the apostles, the foundational leaders of the Christian church. And, breathing a heavy sigh of relief, I can conclude that I am not *personally* responsible to fulfill the Great Commission. Since the apostles are dead and gone, but since Christ has in view a mission that will continue “to the end of the age,” a very fair interpretation of this text is that it is given *to the church*, not the individual. It is intriguing and potentially very freeing to wonder how many commands there are that we assume to be incumbent upon us as individuals to fulfill, but which in fact are given either to the church as a whole or to individuals other than us (for example, the Apostle Paul).

So, for starters, we certainly should be alert, in our seeking to understand the mission of the church, to texts which speak specifically of the church’s responsibility. The Great Commission would certainly be among them, but there are undoubtedly others. The church seeking to do *no less* than Christ calls it to do would certainly want to take all such ecclesiastical texts into account.

But perhaps more germane for our purposes is the opposite issue. What about the danger of taking commands given to individual Christian and applying them to the church? Is it not self-evident that this would be a risky proposition, saddling the church with all sorts of responsibilities which would distract it from its God-given mission, expanding its mission beyond all reasonable proportions? With an approach like this, something as simple as the duty to love one’s neighbor could be seen as the basis of any and every conceivable ministry of mercy. It would be difficult to argue that *any* act of

benevolence, *any* act that might be conducive to the good of others, is outside the purview of the church's responsibility.

I do not mean to suggest that some sort of neat categorization of texts would be easy or even possible. I strongly suspect that there are some blurred lines! But I do think it is important to be alert to the distinction between individual and corporate responsibility and to the danger of imputing one to the other.

Eschatology Realized and Unrealized

Eschatology, broadly and biblically construed, has to do with “irruption,” to recall the word coined by Gerhard von Rad, the breaking in from without, of the kingdom of God, first in part and then in full. The kingdom is *inaugurated* in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ; it is *consummated* in his return at the end of the age. Thus there are dimensions of the kingdom of God that are *already* and those that are *not yet*; there is present and ongoing *realization* of the realities of the kingdom but there is much that will be *unrealized* until the consummation of all things. The Christian church finds itself carrying out its mission during the period of inauguration, what some have called a semi-eschatological age.

This eschatological framework is a useful rubric in thinking through what we may expect, and that for which the church is responsible, in the present age. Prior to the twentieth century, there was a sense in which the Christian's “center of gravity” lay in the world to come; that, whatever the benefits were that accrue to being a Christian in this life, they were immeasurably surpassed by what awaited in the world to come and in the new heavens and the new earth.

The twentieth century witnessed significant advances in technology, standard of living, and general well-being, especially for Americans. While all advances have their (usually unanticipated) downsides, there can be no doubt that the increased prosperity so many enjoyed was most welcome. However, one of the unintended consequences of an increased standard of living was a shifting of that center of gravity for Christians. Yes, they still longed for what awaited them at the consummation. But now there was legitimately more to be hoped for in the present life, more that could be accomplished. And this obtains not only in the case of the individual but in the case of the church and how it construes its mission. There is, quite simply, more that the church will be able to do by way of improving the quality of life of others—but should it?

There have always been groups of Christians who eschew any role of the church in the betterment of society. Think, for example, of the old saw of the early Dispensationalists: “Don’t polish the brass on a sinking ship.” But, by and large, the last century or so has seen Christians and their churches increasingly engaged in political activity, social justice initiatives, and societal reform. To be clear: an effort, an initiative, an emphasis must be judged on its own merits; it may be a good idea, it may be a bad idea; it may be wise or foolish. But the simple fact that something is a good idea, a wise course of action, does not necessarily imply that it is something that the Christian church should undertake.

It is instructive and interesting to listen to some of the language that is employed to describe how the church is supposed to impact the world. For example, these days we often hear about the importance of promoting “human flourishing.” And human flourishing, as such, must be a good thing. But when we are told to believe that it is the

church's job to promote human flourishing, surely some critical reflection is called for. If human flourishing is construed as involving all manner of ways in which human beings might grow and thrive, then what possible limits could there be to the church's responsibility? Would not the promotion of dietary supplements and exercise regimens be as much fair game as anything else?

Another phrase with positive connotations and resonances is "transforming the culture." To be sure, as one laments the suffering and brokenness of the world, it is a natural and loving instinct to wish to see the culture undergo certain transformations. In the view of some, the church is to be engaged in a program of transforming the culture, of societal betterment. Typically in view are all the various dimensions of culture: the arts, political structures, educational institutions, cities and communities, etc. And it is at least suggested, and at times specifically argued, that the church is to be at the vanguard of such change.

One movement reflective of this tendency was Theonomy (I use the past tense intentionally as I do not sense that the movement currently has much traction). Theonomists have argued that the Sinai/Mosaic covenant provided a model not just for the people of God during that particular epoch of redemptive history but a model for the secular state at all times and in all places. One of the implications of this is that a society is just and ideal to the extent that it conforms to the judicial laws of that covenant. So the United States, for example, would be a just society to the extent that the Law of Moses became the law of the land. While it is theoretically possible in this understanding for the church not to be engaged directly in pursuing these aims, my observation is that churches

with Theonomist leanings place a significant emphasis upon the pursuit of these cultural aims and agenda.

If Theonomy has waned in influence over the last number of years, the different-though-similar movement of neo-Kuyperianism has gained in influence. Taking its name from Abraham Kuyper and his emphasis upon sphere sovereignty and God's lordship over all of life, this movement, whether invoking the name of Kuyper or not, is something of a broad umbrella. Under the shade of this umbrella we find a diverse group of Christian thinkers who are enamored by the concepts of world-and-life view, cultural transformation and engagement, social justice, the environment, and the like. While not noted for having an agenda driven by the Law of Moses, it is similar to Theonomy in that it envisions a society, a world renewed and remade according to certain biblical patterns. For our purposes our concern is not whether some or even all of the features of neo-Kuyperianism warrant our attention in our capacity as individual Christians. Instead, our concern has to do with these matters being brought within the orbit and under the oversight of the visible church. What happens when the church makes these things a priority? What happens when the church sees itself as an agent of cultural transformation? The result is inescapable: it shifts its focus and its emphasis *to* the here and now, it shifts them *away from* eternity.

In its extreme forms, neo-Kuyperianism verges toward a wholesale eclipsing of the prospects of the intermediate state and the new heavens and earth. Such, we are told, are "our ideas;" that the focus of Scripture is God's making all things new *in this life, in this world*. Thankfully these extreme forms would seem to be rare. But they do serve to put on display the tendency of the position.

Again, what underlies all this are different understandings of eschatology, different understandings of the extent to which the kingdom of God is *already* and the extent to which it is *not yet*. These different understandings of the eschatological structure of redemptive history dramatically shape the contours of the ministry of the church.

A question that constitutes something of a subset of the eschatological discussion has to do with the effects of the fall and the church's responsibility to mitigate them. All the effects of the fall are eradicated at the consummation; no one disputes this. But before then, what can be expected? With the progress of technology, people (not just Christians) are able to do more and more to alleviate the ills that result from the curse. This is unquestionably a good thing. In the area of medical technology alone we should be profoundly thankful for the ways in which life can be extended and its quality improved. But, the more that can be done, the more that the church is able to do, the more it is able to subsume under its oversight. But should it? Medical missions is an issue that comes to mind. May, for example, malaria prevention be part of the church's mission? No one denies that malaria prevention is a vitally important issue in the field of global health. And the technology now exists for such prevention to be pursued on a large scale. But, as we trust the reader can now easily see, that is a very different thing indeed from saying that the Church of Jesus Christ ought to be deploying its resources to prevent malaria.

Common Grace and Special Grace

A theological distinction useful for thinking through the mission of the church is that between common grace and special grace. Common grace is that favor that God shows to sinners, in various ways and to varying degrees, irrespective of union with Christ. Jesus describes it as the rain that falls on the righteous and the unrighteous. It consists of the innumerable blessings that people experience quite apart from having faith in Christ. Good health, breakfast in bed, watching the sun set over the Pacific, playing with your grandchildren—this is common grace. It is common in the sense that it is common to people generically, not just Christians. And it is temporary—it comes to an end at the end of the present age. In the age to come, the outward blessings of the new heavens and new earth are enjoyed only by the redeemed.

Special grace is particular, redemptive, and eternal. It is the grace that brings sinners into a saving relationship with Christ. It is a grace that is planned in the eternal counsel of God, accomplished through the active and passive obedience of the Lord Jesus Christ, and applied to his people through the work of the Holy Spirit. Christians are thus doubly blessed, enjoying both common and special grace.

This distinction is of value in thinking through the mission of the church. There are common grace institutions and special grace institutions, the missions of each corresponding to their natures. For example, marriage is a common grace institution. Both believers and unbelievers get married. While marriage is of particular illustrative value in depicting the relationship between Christ and the church, as an institution it is given for the benefit of humanity as a whole, irrespective of religious belief. The same is

true of the state. It is a temporal (not eternal), common grace institution designed to benefit people, not Christians in particular.

As we think about various activities in which the church might consider engaging, it would seem that many of them have a *common* character, common in the sense of being for the good of people generically. This would include political advocacy, various mercy ministries, and various efforts that have as their goal to shape and transform the culture. But what kind of institution is the church? Is it a common grace institution or a special grace institution? It seems most emphatically that it is the latter, proclaiming as it does the saving grace of God to sinners, bearing witness to an everlasting gospel, and admitting people to and excluding them from a kingdom that shall endure forever. Is it going too far to suggest that this distinction represents something of a useful test to ascertain whether a given activity/ministry is within the purview of the church?

There is, to be sure, a temporal dimension to the work of the church that finds expression in the church's diaconal ministry. So it would not be correct to say that an activity's having a temporal benefit inherently excludes it from the church's mission. But as diaconal ministry is a discrete topic in our series of theological reflections, we turn to it next.

The Scope of Diaconal Ministry

All would readily grant that diaconal ministry is a vital component of the church's communal life. The PCA's *Book of Church Order* provides a fine and helpful definition of the work of the deacon.

The office of deacon is set forth in the Scriptures as ordinary and perpetual in the Church. The office is one of sympathy and service, after the example of the Lord

Jesus; it expresses also the communion of saints, especially in their helping one another in time of need. It is the duty of the deacons to minister to those who are in need, to the sick, to the friendless, and to any who may be in distress. (9-1, 2)

Unpacking the meaning of communion of the saints, the *Westminster Confession* employs language of Christians having

communion in each other's gifts and graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man.... as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities. Which communion, as God offers opportunity, is to be extended unto all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus. (WCF XXVI)

One of the things that seem fairly obvious from these and similar constitutional standards is that diaconal ministry, as such, is to be directed *only* toward believers. Unbelievers, therefore, are not appropriate objects of diaconal benevolence. This historic consensus has been challenged in recent years. It is now argued by many that diaconal ministry, or mercy ministry, ought to be extended to those outside the church. This is part of a larger effort to foster a word-and-deed ministry that meets human needs and lends added credibility to the message of the gospel. If part of the church's ministry to the individual is to meet his or her real and pressing needs (such as food, clothing, shelter, medical care), this will demonstrate genuine love and make it more likely for the gospel to gain a hearing.

There is certainly a practical logic to the idea of a word-and-deed ministry. At a certain level it makes sense that general benevolences would augment the proclamation of the gospel and would be a way of demonstrating the love of Christ in tangible ways. Nevertheless, it still must be asked whether this is God's design for diaconal ministry. The simple fact that the widow's list of 1 Timothy 5 involves a piety requirement for the reception of diaconal assistance makes it *prima facie* unlikely that those who have no

profession of faith, let alone demonstrable piety, should receive such assistance. There are many other ways in which compassionate Christian people can engage in general benevolences. They can do so as individuals. They can do so by forming “benevolent societies,” the older phrase for what we would refer to as an agency, or a mission, or a center. And Christians can pursue such things in such a manner as they are guided by the teaching ministry and shepherding oversight. But that is different from the deacons and their assistants to use diaconal resources to meet such needs.

I will note that it is a distinct and separate question as to whether the church, in its outreach and evangelistic ministry, may employ material assistance as part of such a ministry. In a sense, this would mirror what many churches do with their broader approaches to diaconal ministry...but it would be different and distinct. This raises its own set of questions, including but not limited to discerning the motives of the recipients (are they simply “singing for their dinner?”) and whether there is a danger that the sincerity of the proclamation of the gospel may be compromised or clouded. But, as I say, this is a distinct question that has to be evaluated on its own merits and separately from the theology of diaconal ministry.

Kingdom and Church

The history of biblical interpretation reflects various understandings of how the kingdom of God and the church are to be understood and how they relate to one another. At times they are seen as coextensive. It should at least be of interest to Reformed Presbyterians that the *Westminster Confession* appears to take this approach: it defines the church, in part, as “the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Others see kingdom as a

broader concept, of which the church is a subset. One can imagine a variety of Venn diagrams, each of which would represent a distinctly different relationship between kingdom and church.

My purpose is not to argue strongly for one set of definitions over others...though I must say I am inclined toward the construction provided by the Westminster divines. Rather, I am interested in the tendency to construe kingdom broadly, to assert that the church is to be engaged in “kingdom work,” and then for the green light to be given to subsume any activity in question under the ministry of the church.

No one doubts that the Lord God rules over the entire universe, that he is king over all the created order, including every dimension of life in this world. In that particular sense, all that *is* is under the rule of God’s kingdom. But as soon as we grant that there are narrower constructions of the kingdom of God, we have to be willing to grant that certain activities and spheres will fall outside of God’s kingdom as defined in that more narrow sense.

For example, when the kingdom of God arrived in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ, that implies that it was not present prior to the beginning of his ministry. In the year 15 A.D., God’s kingdom was a present reality in one sense but not in another. In the narrower sense, it had not yet arrived; it was not “at hand.”

To the extent that there is equivocation, conscious or unconscious, on the meaning of the kingdom God, there will be inevitable confusion. Anything deemed to be important or significant to any degree can be labeled “kingdom work;” and since the business of the church is to do the work of kingdom there is no consistent way to place limits upon the church’s mission. While no church literally tries to do everything, if there

are no theological screens in place the church becomes devoid of discernment and appropriate discrimination. Other criteria determine what it does and what it does not do, criteria that may have precious little to do with God's revealed will, God's design for the church.

I have no doubt that there are legitimate differences of opinion as to the sense in which the church is and does the work of the kingdom of God. My plea is not so much that others view the relationship between kingdom and church exactly as I do, but rather that they have some measure of clarity as to what it means for the church to be manifestation of God's kingdom and for the church to do the work of the kingdom. However such things are construed, they must surely be narrower than God's kingship over the entire created order. And, to the extent that such is the case, there will be certain limitations as to what falls within the purview of the church's kingdom labors.

Gospel Proclamation and Neighbor Love

As this chapter continues to advance distinctions that help us to clarify the mission of the church, one that is deceptively simple but very illuminating is that between the proclamation of the gospel and the love of one's neighbor. Neighbor love is clearly the broader of the two. It has to do with doing good to others made in God's image simply by virtue of the fact that they are made in God's image, that they are human beings. It does not, as such, have a redemptive purpose or "angle." We do not love others simply to pave the way to share the gospel with them. Loving others is, in a sense, an end in itself. Viewing neighbor love in this way can help to prevent us from using others: loving them with the sole ulterior motive of introducing them to Christ.

The proclamation of the gospel is a particular variety of neighbor love, one which does have as its express goal the conversion of sinners, the making of disciples. Like all acts of neighbor love it has regard for the person's being made in the image of God. But, in addition, it has regard for the person's need of redemption and it is explicit in conveying that need to the individual.

This simple distinction can be of great help in clarifying the mission of the church. It is clearly the responsibility of the *Christian* to love others indiscriminately, irrespective of whether or not they come to faith in Christ. The church, I would argue, does not have the responsibility of generic neighbor love. It is called to love its neighbors in a particular way: by declaring the glad tidings of the gospel. Whether this can and should be augmented by other forms of love is a separate question. The point is simply that the way in which the church is called to love the world around it is inextricably bound up with the proclamation of the gospel.

Idolatry, Relevance, and the Fear of Man

Idolatry and the fear of man might seem to be odd categories to raise in connection with the mission of the church. Yet they are unquestionably germane because of the pressure that the culture places upon the church, a pressure which often has the effect of reshaping and recasting the church's sense of mission.

The world is not content simply to oppose the church's mission or to relegate it to the margins. Very insidiously, there are ways in which the world co-opts the mission of the church and makes it in the world's own image. If the world can sufficiently alter and

undermine the mission of the church, the church's continued existence and even vigorous activity poses no ultimate threat to the enterprises of unbelief.

There are many voices today telling the church what it ought to be, what it ought to do. Often these imperatives have to do with the church's being authentic and relevant. As Evangelicals, we may be aware of how this kind of thinking characterized the Protestant Liberalism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and how it served to eviscerate the church's witness. The church, Christians were told, had to change to suit the times. A message that was relevant and resonant in the 16th or 17th centuries would not gain a hearing from contemporary listeners, so it was argued. We look upon such abandonment of the gospel with sadness and bemusement.

In the early 21st century, there is new chorus of pleas. Issues surrounding climate change and social justice and race relations and income inequality and gender identity, just to name a few, are pressed upon the church. The church, it is told, must speak to these issues and indeed engage these issues lest it be branded as arcane and irrelevant. Not to adapt to the times and to address the issues of concern to people will be our death knell. But to engage and embrace such issues is seen as being relevant and authentic. The church, thereby, speaks to matters that are of concern to people.

My intention is not to imply that the various pressing issues which people want the church to take on are not important issues. In most cases they are and therefore they should receive appropriate attention. But should *the church* be the entity that provides that needed attention? The failure to ask this necessary question results in the collapsing of categories that need to remain distinct.

There is an allure to pleasing people, to giving them what they want, giving them what they demand. It feeds the ego, it swells one's sense of importance and value. And herein lie the temptation to idolatry and the temptation to the fear of man which, Proverbs tells us, is a snare. These are temptations which beset not merely the individual believer but the church and the people who shape its sense of mission. And they are temptations which need to be resisted.

A useful distinction to keep in mind in this connection is *pleasing* people versus *serving* people. As Paul notes in Galatians 1, if he were still pleasing men he would not be a servant of Christ. Instead, he *serves* people in proclaiming the gospel, which may or may not be pleasing to them. Like the apostle Paul, the church is called to serve the world around it. This may be pleasing or displeasing to the world (often defined in terms of relevance or authenticity or being helpful), but such is not the ultimate criterion that determines what the church does. When pleasing or impressing or garnering the support and approval of the world becomes determinative of what the church does with its resources, the church is no longer functioning at the behest of the great King and Head of the church and, if it is continuing to fulfill its God-given mission, it is only doing so coincidentally and has no basis for confidence that it will continue doing so.

The Politicization of the Church

A particularly egregious blight upon the church's mission, one which is impacted by a number of the issues raised in this chapter and with which we shall conclude our discussion of various theological considerations, is the politicization of the church. By this I mean the prostituting of the Church of Jesus Christ to advance the agenda of

partisan political interests. It should be noted at the outset that this phenomenon is no “respector of persons,” persons being understood in terms of political ideologies. The political right and the political left are equally guilty, although we tend to be more offended by the transgressions of those of opposite political persuasions.

Consider the power of this temptation. A group of Christian people are already organized as a church. They gather together at set times during the week. They are led by people whom they trust. They all want to make a difference in the world around them. They are concerned about injustice and moral decay. How convenient and tempting it is for the church to align itself with a political party, candidate, or platform. And how, in the eyes of politicians and their surrogates and operatives, does the Christian church appear to be low-hanging fruit, people easily used and manipulated.

The politicization of the church has become so commonplace and accepted in the United States that its various manifestations scarcely raise an eyebrow. Churches and their leaders endorsing political candidates...voting guides included with orders of worship...crassly politicized prayers from the pulpit...partisan sermons...politicians speaking during services of worship...the casual and indiscriminate intermingling of biblical morality with a politico-cultural agenda...the longing for a bygone Christian America...patriotic celebrations as part of the worship of the Lord’s Day. One does not need to look hard or far to find these sorts of things and more, usually without anyone raising any questions of propriety. In the most extreme examples, one could be forgiven for thinking that the local house of worship is simply a front for the Democratic or Republican party.

Since politics and the work of the church have become so miserably intertwined in so many cases, it is imperative to lean hard in the other direction and to bear as clear a testimony as possible that “my kingdom is not of this world.” This will of course run the risk of the church’s being accused of being an exercise in studied and antiquated irrelevance. But, in terms of severity, it is surely wise for the measures to match the times.

Chapter 4

TWELVE THESES ON THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

The purpose of this chapter is to set forth a series of theses on the mission of the visible church. These will draw both on some of the questions raised in Chapter 1 and on the theological considerations laid out in Chapter 3. It is my hope that they resolve some questions in the reader's mind from those earlier chapters. My goal is to formulate theses that apply to the visible church *generically*, in all its expressions and varieties, leaving to Chapter 5 considerations and applications that would be unique to my ecclesiastical context.

Thesis #1

**The Church of Jesus Christ is an institution,
not a voluntary association.**

Voluntary associations admit of an almost infinite variety. There are all sorts of ways in which people organize and associate with one another. A street gang is a voluntary association. The National Rifle Association is a voluntary association. The Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals is a voluntary association. As are the Mercedes-Benz Club of America, the Republican Party, the Ku Klux Klan, the Audubon Society, and the Teamsters Union. What these and thousands of other organizations have in common is that they have *not* been instituted by God in his word. They will differ in terms of their purposes, scope, value and importance, legality and morality. But they do not owe their origin to

the revealed will of God. Instead, they owe their origin to people's desire to associate for reasons they deem to be sufficient and important.

Now it should be perfectly obvious that many voluntary associations engage in activities which, from the perspective of biblical ethics, are at least innocent and permissible, perhaps laudable and praiseworthy. The neighborhood book group, the wine tasting club, and the music appreciation society would not seem *necessarily* to involve its members and adherents in any form of sin; they can all pursue their functions to the glory of God. While such societies have no authority to *compel* their members to do anything, their activities involve no necessary transgression of the revealed will of God.

It should also be perfectly obvious that there are other voluntary associations which, in the nature of the case, involve sin. ISIS and the KKK come to mind. While they share with other voluntary societies the feature of being founded upon desires and aspirations that are viewed as furthering certain ends, it is difficult to imagine how at least *some* of the activities of such organizations do not involve sin.

Over against the innumerable and infinitely varied category of voluntary associations stands the institution. By institution we mean an organization that has been instituted, not by man, but by God himself. Historically, these have been regarded as three in number: the family, the state, and the church. All three came into being by the will of God: the family in the creation account of Genesis 2, the state in its oracular institution in Genesis 4 (though some would argue for a somewhat later institution in the provisions of the post-diluvian Noahic covenant),

and the church. Depending on which definition of the church one employs, it was instituted in either the nation God made of the sons and daughters of Abraham or in the New Covenant community brought into existence through the death and resurrection of Christ. These three institutions do not exist because some group of people thought they would be good ideas based upon beneficial concepts. They exist because God *brought* them into existence by his own absolute authority.

The simple point we are making at this juncture is that institutions and voluntary associations are two distinct categories with two distinct origins. And we should expect that the fact that the church is an institution and not a voluntary association should have a significant bearing on its activities and mission.

Thesis #2

**Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church,
not only in being the source of its life,
but also in being the authority
for all that it is and does.**

Some readers will be familiar with the extensive and convoluted debates about “headship,” especially as they pertain to the husband and wife relationship as discussed in Ephesians 5. In an effort to downplay any meaning related to authority, some New Testament scholars argue that headship has to do with the head’s being the source of something, just as the head of a river is the source from which the water flows. While headship in marriage is another topic for another

day, there can be no denying that Christ is the source of the church and its life.

The church owes its very existence to what Christ has done in his saving work.

But however one parses the meaning of headship, it is also true that Christ has absolutely authority over the church. He is a king, an absolute monarch and potentate. Potter and clay come to mind; the former does what he wills with the latter. For ourselves, we believe this to be the most likely implication of Christ's headship: authority over the life and activity of the church.

Is this authority not self-evident? Is anyone really prepared to suggest that Christ does *not* have absolute authority over the church? To be sure, such authority may allow for a great deal of latitude and liberty; and, indeed, we would argue that Christ has, in many respects, afforded the church a considerable degree of freedom in how it carries out its mission. Authority *as such* does not imply a rigid, detailed script. But it *does* imply crown-right prerogatives to dictate what the life and mission of the church should look like. To the extent that the king and head of the church *has* revealed his will for its mission, it should be a matter of highest priority to ascertain what that will is.

Thesis #3

**Since the Church is an institution,
its purpose and mission can be only that which is given to it by Christ—no
more, no less.**

There is, it seems to us, a necessary connection between institution and mission; that is, there must be a relationship between God's calling an institution into existence and his purposes for said institution. Hypothetically, of course, it is conceivable that God could institute the church, the family, and the state with no thoughts whatsoever as to what institutional life ought to look like. But, surely, every scriptural consideration militates against this. Surely, to suppose that an institution has complete and absolute discretion, that *the church* has complete and absolute discretion, is absurd. If God brought the church into existence, he did not do so in order that people could simply do what is right in their own eyes (to recall a biblical phrase of reprobation). He must have something in mind as to what their mission is.

It is here that the analogy with the regulative principle of worship alluded to in Chapter 1 comes into play and is particularly apt. Quite apart from the biblical proof texts that could be marshalled, consider the goal of worship which presumably none would deny: to honor and please God with our sacrifice of praise. Since God is the holy creator and we are sinful creatures, how could we possibly determine what worship is acceptable to him unless he reveals it to us? Surely he is the best and only infallible judge of what is pleasing to him.

The illustration that is sometimes employed is that of an important foreign dignitary visiting your country and your home. And it is your privilege as host to make him comfortable, to attend to his preferences, to offer a cuisine that is palatable and enjoyable. How would you go about making such determinations? Would you consult your own tastes and preferences, assuming that surely yours will coincide with his? Of course not; that would be foolish in the extreme. No, you would make every effort to find out (through whatever means necessary) what his tastes and preferences are and adjust your hospitality accordingly.

There's a sense in which God is the ultimate visiting dignitary. He is from *elsewhere*. He is *foreign* in the sense of *holy and heavenly*. Therefore if we want to ascertain what he wants and likes in worship we will consult *him*, not ourselves. Is this not self-evident? How could things be otherwise?

Surely something analogous must obtain in the case of the mission of the church. The church of the Lord Jesus Christ has some sort of mission, something it is supposed to do. Since the church has been brought into existence by Christ, indeed has been purchased by his own blood, is it not clear, quite apart from this or that proof text, that Christ is the one to determine *why* the church was brought into existence? To pose the question another way: is it conceivable that the church, having been purchased by the blood of Christ, could have complete latitude and discretion as to what its mission is? It strains credulity to imagine Christ saying to the church, in effect, "Do whatever you want with your time and resources. *Be* whatever you want. Such things are matters of entire indifference

to me.” No—our every expectation should be that Christ will provide his church with its mission, an expectation which he of course meets.

Not many professing any sort of allegiance to biblical authority will care to dispute the above contention that Christ himself defines the mission of the church, a mission which the church is not at liberty to cast aside. But the flipside of the issue is whether the church is at liberty to add to its mission. This is the significance of the title “No More, No Less.” Even if we grant that the church’s mission is no less than what Christ has commanded (i.e., that the church is obligated to do what Christ has commanded it), we must also assert that the church’s mission is *no more* than what Christ has commanded. There are several compelling reasons why this must be the case. First, there is the ambassadorial character of the church and its mission. If we are claiming to be an institution which acts on Christ’s behalf, then how can we possibly be at liberty to invent mission? Second, there is the matter of diversion of resources. To the extent that the church adds to its mission it will likely consume time, money, and other resources that could be expended upon the things Christ has commanded the church to do. (Although it is of course possible that certain additions contribute to a synergy that might enhance the church’s mission.) Finally, there is the very serious matter of the church’s arrogating to itself wisdom and knowledge that it simply does not possess. If it were in fact good and wise for the church to have an expanded, more inclusive mission, would not Christ, in his infinite wisdom have had the insight and foresight to include such things? While not wishing to doubt anyone’s sincerity, compassion, and desire to be relevant and effective, we

must make that point that it involves a certain kind of arrogance to suggest, even unwittingly, that the sinful creature is in a position to offer enhancements and improvements to the mission Christ has given to the church.

The fact that there is a regulative principle for mission leaves unaddressed, of course, many questions. There are a whole host of issues related to specificity, strategy, timing, etc., concerning which there may be a good deal of latitude. To reiterate points made earlier, no one is suggesting that Christ has given some sort of exhaustive blueprint as to what the church should be doing, how it should be fulfilling its mission. The existence of a regulative *principle*, whether for worship or mission, does not imply anything, as such, as to how detailed or finely-tuned its application is going to be.

It is thus our contention that the mission of the church is regulated in the same way that the worship of the church is regulated. And it would especially be our plea that not only would Christians in general see the biblical logic of the parallel, but that those convinced of the latter would be equally convinced of the former.

Thesis #4

It is valid to distinguish between what the Church does in its capacity as a Church and what its members do in their capacities as individuals.

One of the matters that routinely obscure discussions of the church's mission is a lack of clarity as to what is meant by "the church." Specifically, are we simply referring to the people of God as a plural entity, as in "Christians?" Or

are we referring an organized society? To the extent that people are aware of the distinction, it's often described as the church as organism versus the church as organization. That can be a somewhat helpful distinction. However, typically people operate (perhaps unintentionally) with a very low view of the visible church (or institutional church) so that any potential distinctions and differences between the visible church and Christians are collapsed. When that happens, what is true of one is true of the other since they are the same.

In point of fact, it is valid and meaningful to distinguish between the two. The visible church is a gathered and organized community of those who profess to follow Jesus Christ and their children. (Different communions will, of course, have different understandings as to whether children who do not yet profess faith in Christ are to be considered part of the church). It will have certain practices and responsibilities; it will have leadership and governance; it will have, whether stated or unstated, a mission, a vision, a set of core values, and a set of doctrinal standards.

But the members of the church, Christians, will all have lives that fall outside the life of the visible church. They will have lives as individuals and lives in other associated capacities, i.e., other groups and organizations of which they are a part.

The validity of this distinction should be obvious. We could say, for example, that First Presbyterian Church is hosting a missions conference, or holding an evening service, or having an outreach to Haitians. But if ten members of said church were getting together to drink beer, or go bowling, or participate in

a political rally, we wouldn't be inclined to say that First Presbyterian Church is doing those things. Now, they *could* be. FPC could have a bowling night as a recreational activity. But the simple fact that its members are bowling together does not make it something the church is doing. Each one of us does things every day that are not functions of the church of which we are members. When, however, this fairly pedestrian observation is lost sight of, the way is paved for significant confusion as to what is within the purview of the church's mission. Specifically, the temptation and tendency are to regard things that are clearly legitimate activities of Christians and bring them under the umbrella of the church's mission.

Thesis #5

Many things which are the responsibility of individual believers are not the responsibility of the Church, and vice versa.

Following closely upon the heels of the above is the observation that there are responsibilities that Christians have that are not the responsibility of the church; and there are responsibilities that the church has that are not the responsibility of Christians. Of course, there are some responsibilities that are shared in common. Prayer, for instance, would be a fairly obvious example of something that is *both* the responsibility of the church *and* the responsibility of the individual believer. Another would be meditating upon the word of God. Undoubtedly a number of others could be enumerated.

But take baptism, for example. The Great Commission in Mt. 28 authorizes the apostles (and, by legitimate inference, the church) to baptize as part of the disciple-making enterprise. Most would concede, however, that this is not to be done by private individuals; it is the church, in its official capacity and by its authorized representatives, that baptizes, not individuals. Or consider the responsibility of the church to teach, also found in the Great Commission. Surely that responsibility does not devolve upon every Christian. Not every Christian is able to teach, let alone teach everything that Christ has commanded. This is a responsibility for the church to fulfill. Finally, consider the practice of formal discipline. Who censures? Who excommunicates? Who receives back into fellowship? Surely it is *the church*, and not Christians as individuals or in other associated capacities.

It should be said that all this should sound very freeing to the Christian. All too often the impression is given (sincerely and perhaps unwittingly, to be sure), that I, as an individual, am responsible for all that needs to be done. *I* am to evangelize the lost; *I* am to make disciples; *I* am to be a missionary in my own mission field. I, I, *I* am responsible for all this and so much more. In addition to flying in the face of the New Testament's unambiguous emphasis on the diversity of gifts within the body of Christ, this construction of the believer's responsibility lays an unbearable burden upon his or her back. But this burden is immediately and wonderfully removed once it is understood that these are *church* responsibilities, not *individual* responsibilities.

On the other side of the ledger there are the infinite array of privileges and responsibilities clearly within the purview of the individual believer's calling that lie *outside* the calling of the church. This gets to the heart of the issue. There are so many *good things* that Christians may do and must do. No one doubts that there is broad latitude in this regard. Everything from working in renewable energy to lobbying to holding public office to being a healthcare provider to running a soup kitchen—and so much more—are clear examples of the kinds of works that are pleasing to God. But just because something is a good work for the believer to do doesn't *necessarily* mean that it is part of the church's mission. This is the mistake that is so routinely made: the conviction that *somebody* ought to be doing it means that the *church* ought to be doing it. The "temptation," if we may call it that, is that the church represents the infrastructure and resources that people want to undergird their various efforts. But where does it end? If there are no responsibilities that are the province of the believer and not the church, then there is no limit to the sorts of things the church may take on in its efforts to benefit the world. And this tendency inevitably and inexorably leads to the church's losing sight of the unique mission given to her by Christ.

Thesis #6

The proper activities of the Church are to be found in ecclesiastical texts, texts which descriptively and prescriptively define the church's mission.

Any hopes that one might have of finding in Scripture a neat and tidy delineation between the duties of the believer and the duties of the church are

quickly dashed. There is, to be sure, a degree of murkiness involved in sifting and sorting, in seeking to discern God's revealed will for the church over against his will for believers, wherein they overlap and wherein they differ. This will give rise to certain ambiguities and some legitimate debates. However, the enterprise itself is worth pursuing. We should seek to discover in the biblical text the mind and will of God regarding the mission of the church.

In principle, any portion of Scripture may potentially shed light on this question. In particular, we should not rule out the Old Testament as being germane. It may well be that some of the prophetic anticipations of the arrival of the kingdom and the messianic community will contribute to our understanding of the church's mission. But certainly pride of place should be given to the New Testament, for it is those books that bear most direct witness to the establishment of the church.

What should we look for? First and most obviously, we will look to the various explicit charters and commissions of the church and other normative statements as to what the church ought to do doing. Pride of place would certainly go the Great Commission found in Mt. 28:16-20. Other examples could include the seminal keys of the kingdom pronouncement in Mt. 16:17-19, the gospel being preached to all nations in Mk. 13:10 and 14:9, the proclamation of repentance and forgiveness of sins in Lk. 22:46ff, and the apostolic witness in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth in Acts 1:8. These texts, especially taken together, begin to give shape and definition to the role the church is called to play in the world.

Second, we will look at what the church did under apostolic oversight. In this regard the Book of Acts is particularly significant, but other parts of the New Testament will contain descriptive statements as well. The apostolic era, in its prescriptions and descriptions, serves to flesh out and fill in the meaning of the charters/commissions.

Two provisos are important here. First, the normative-narrative distinction must be kept in mind; just because something is described as having taken place does not mean that it constitutes a positive example for us to follow. However, this distinction must not be pressed so far as to rule out a narrative's having a normative force. In Acts, we have an extensive record of how the early church fulfilled its mission. On the one hand, the simple fact that the early church did something does not necessarily impose upon us a binding example. But it may. It *may* be the case that a particular example has a normative force. This exegetical and theological issue will have to be considered on a case by case basis.

The other proviso is that we need to be cognizant of the valid and biblical distinction between the apostolic era and the post-apostolic era. The former is the foundation-laying period of the church; the latter is the house-building period that continues until the return of Christ. As Richard Gaffin has cogently argued,¹ this distinction is not some artificial construct imposed upon Scripture, but rather is an understanding of the development of the New Covenant

1. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *Perspectives on Pentecost: Studies in New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (Phillisburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1979).

community borne witness to by Scripture itself. One implication of this is that, in principle, there may be activities that characterized the apostolic church that do not characterize the post-apostolic church. For example, debates Christians have had over miraculous healings or the gift of prophecy might come into play here. Our purpose is not to resolve these debates. Instead, it is simply to point out that these issues must be taken into account when formulating our understanding of the church's mission.

Thesis #7

With regard to the Church's relationship to the world, its exclusive mission is to make disciples.

No one doubts, least of all the author of this thesis, that the Christian's duty to love his/her neighbor has broad-ranging implications. Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, bringing relief to the suffering...surely the ways in which we, as Christians, are to love our neighbors are as numerous and varied as are the evidences of our fallen condition. Furthermore, no one disputes that it is a good idea for Christians to collaborate, to form organizations, to coordinate their efforts, and to work with people who are not Christians in their efforts to love others well. So-called "benevolent societies" are a wonderful idea: organizations that exist to do good works that benefit others. There is no sphere of legitimate influence that is off-limits for the Christian. The believer in Christ is free to engage in all manner of cultural, political, benevolent, artistic, and educational

activity for the benefit of others. *But*, these are not functions that *the church* is called to fulfill.

The sole function of the church in its relationship to the world is to make disciples. That and that alone is what Christ calls it to do. In a sense one could say that the *entire* responsibility of the church in its engagement with the world, the culture, is contained in the Great Commission. Making disciples of course includes evangelization, bringing people into the church through baptism, and then teaching them to live as the followers of Christ.

It really must be asked: is this not a calling that is monumental enough? Is this not enough to consume all of the church's energies and labors? Quite apart from the fact that Christ has not authorized the church to do more than this, should she really be doing other things when, now as then, the fields are white unto harvest?

Suppose a little girl has done all she has been asked to do by her parents. She has done her homework, cleaned her room, played with her younger brother, and taken a bath. Having completed all that she has been asked to do, she understandably feels free to do other things, especially things that might please her parents. But for her to move on to other good works having left undone those things she was asked to do...is this not a dereliction of duty? Would not her parents be well within their rights to insist that she first complete the assigned tasks? And is it not evident that no degree of honorable intentions in attending to other matters negates her failure to do what she was told to do?

It would seem that something analogous comes into play when it comes to the church's mission. How can we be justified in finding additional things to do when we have not performed the ecclesiastical counterparts of cleaning our room and taken our bath? Which local assembly of Jesus Christ can claim that it is making every reasonable effort to fulfill the Great Commission and that, therefore, with its overflow of resources, is going to move on to other things? Surely to ask the question is to answer it; it contains its own indictment.

Thesis #8

By implication, activities that do not have as their primary purpose the making of disciples are not properly part of the Church's mission. *However*, some of these activities may play an ancillary role in the church's disciple-making activities.

What we have taken away with one hand we would like, at least in part, to give back with the other. By now it will be clear that we do not believe that a wide range of neighbor-loving, society-benefitting activities fall within the purview of the mission of the church. Instead, they are best pursued by Christians and others who have a desire to improve the lives of others. But, in our judgment, this conclusion does not rule out the possibility that *some* of these activities may find a legitimate place as *part of* the disciple-making function of the church. That is, it may be that they can play a supportive, ancillary role that does not violate the ecclesiastical principles that we have been seeking to establish.

Perhaps some illustrations may help elucidate this point. Let us assume, for example, that it is not within the scope of the church's mission to establish a soup kitchen that exists for the primary purpose of feeding hungry people. A soup kitchen, of course, is a *great idea*, just not something *the church* is to pursue. But what if a church desires to reach the urban poor within its community with the gospel and that it determines that an effective means of doing so is within the context of a soup kitchen? Its purpose is to proclaim the gospel and to make disciples; it does so while feeding hungry people. Is there anything inherently inappropriate about this? In our judgment, there is not. To be sure, there are ethical considerations that come into play. The church would need to be truthful and forthright about what it is doing; there must not be even a hint of "bait and switch," of so-called "singing for one's dinner." The church would need to think through carefully the implications of Paul's determination in 2 Cor. 4:2: "But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God." As long as these sorts of considerations are taken into account, there is no reason *in principle* that the church could not operate an evangelistic soup kitchen. In this way, the church would be meeting the needs of the whole person, but in such a manner that the disciple-making mission is explicit and conspicuous.

Another example that comes to mind is so-called medical missions. Students of the history of American Presbyterianism may be aware of the fact that this was a topic of somewhat lively debate in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church

in the early 1960's. Meredith Kline's minority report to the Thirty-First General Assembly will provide the reader with a good sense of the issues at stake.² Just as with the example of the soup kitchen, we do not believe that it is the proper work of the Christian church to establish a medical clinic or a hospital. Kline frames the question thusly: "*The precise question that requires study is whether there is a biblical warrant for the church as church institution to administer the affairs of a medical establishment through its official agencies or to practice medicine through 'missionaries' appointed specifically for that purpose and so performing that function not as private individuals but in their specific capacity as official agents of the church.*" Along with Kline, we would answer this question in the negative. However, what if the church determined that, in its efforts to reach a people group with the gospel, it was wise and prudent for some degree of medical care to serve a supporting and ancillary role? Would this *necessarily* constitute an unwarranted expansion of the mission of the church? We do not think so. It would seem that, as long as the making of disciples remains primary, there could be a legitimate role for medicine.

Examples could be multiplied. One other is English as a second language, a quite common ministry for churches to offer in our increasingly diverse society. But the simple yet at once complex point that we are making is that what is out of place as a stand-alone ministry could well have a place in an explicitly supportive role. This, of course, involves certain temptations. Specifically, it could be a Trojan horse that opens the door to any and every

2. Meredith Kline, "Minority Report, Committee on Foreign Missions," *Presbyterian Guardian* 33 (May-June 1964), 81-82.

activity on the sole ground that the activity in question is simply supportive in nature. Clearly the church needs to resist this kind of special pleading. That being said, there may be occasions when the church concludes that it is wise and prudent for certain kinds of mercy ministries, general benevolences, to serve as the vehicles and contexts through which the message of the gospel is made known.

Surely one of the governing principles in these kinds of discussions is the apostolic pattern in disciple-making. How can it not be the case that the early church is instructive in this regard? While there is no need to assume that apostolic methods are absolutely exhaustive such that the church may not be innovative in any sense, we should certainly be hesitant in adding layer upon layer to how the early church proclaimed the gospel. Surely there is something to be said for the purity and the simplicity of the approach reflected in the pages of the New Testament.

Thesis #9

As many activities that are not properly part of the church's mission *are* appropriate for disciples to be involved in, the church therefore should, to some appropriate degree, be equipping the saints to be involved in these other activities.

There is a meaningful and manifest difference between the church's doing something and the church's equipping its members to do that very thing. Saying that something is not part of the church's mission is not the same as saying

that the church is against it. In fact, the church will be very much in favor of seeing its members flourish in a wide range of activities and callings that are not part of the church's mission.

Perhaps a few examples will be of help here. Most would grant that Christians may engage fully in political processes: as candidates, as lobbyists, as precinct captains, as advocates for changes in public policy. By now it should be clear that *the church* should not directly participate in these kinds of engagements. However, surely it has a role in helping its members be wise and faithful in their political pursuits. So the church might help its members think through what it means to speak the truth in love in a political context, or what winsome courage looks like, or how to forge alliances with others without violating one's conscience. This godly counsel could come from a sermon, a class, a pastoral visit. The believer is being equipped to engage in the political process by the church, but the church itself is not engaging.

Medical care is of central importance to our lives but is not part of the mission of the visible church (see above). It is not the role of the Christian church to administer antibiotics, to set broken legs, or to offer kidney transplants. But many of the members of the church serve as health-care professionals. They will contend with thorny and complex questions of medical ethics, need to learn how to speak truthfully and compassionately, have to think through carefully issues related to the beginning of life, the end of life, and indeed the very nature of life. Surely the church has a role in helping these practitioners think through these issues in light of both special and general revelation. The disciple-making

ministry of the church will play a bit part in helping doctors, nurses, and others think and act in ways that are wise and honoring to God...but without ever lifting a scalpel itself.

Many in our Reformed tradition believe that part of the church's mission is general education, teaching things like geometry and biology and American history. In other words, it is legitimate for the church to operate and oversee a school, whether elementary, secondary, or undergraduate. Personally, I do not share this enthusiasm for the church's operating a school. While I recognize that a case can be made for construing disciple-making very broadly, and, thereby, including general education, I don't find the argument persuasive. If there is to be such a thing as a Christian school or college, I believe it should be independently governed. It might have a very friendly relationship with the visible church, but it should not be under the church's oversight and for the simple reason that general education falls outside the purview of the church's mission.

Again, however, teachers and educators of all stripes will be found in the church. And they will inevitably be formative influences in the lives of their students. Should not the church play a significant role in equipping them so that their pedagogical labors will be adorned and suffused with grace, humility, and wisdom? Can we not hope that the second grade teacher, or the AP chemistry teacher, or the assistant professor of mechanical engineering, all members of the body of Christ, will serve as living beacons to their students? And can we not further hope that, whatever the field of study, great benefit accrues from pursuing European history, or statistics, or French literature under the Lordship of Christ,

seeking to think and teach and write from a framework saturated with biblical wisdom? Since this is obviously the case, the church will play a not insignificant role and exercise substantial influence in the lives of its members who work in the field of education.

Examples could be multiplied endlessly. Any lawful calling—accountant or florist or plumber or hedge fund manager or computer engineer or salesperson—can benefit from the teaching and pastoral care of the church in ways that directly shape and inform their callings. Yet all the while it is clear that it is not the church that is balancing books or preparing floral arrangements, but rather the members of the church.

Additionally, there will be a certain range of opportunities for service and cultural engagement that the church will want to commend to its members. These are things that the church itself will not be doing but would be happy to see its members doing. The encouragement could come in the form of bulletin or newsletter announcements or an announcement made at a church gathering. Deciding what to announce and promote and what not to will require much discernment and wisdom. The church leadership must gauge what opportunities might be unduly disruptive to the peace and harmony of the church. For example, it is hard to imagine that it would be wise to promote events associated with partisan politics, such as a rally for a particular candidate. Surely this would have the effect of politicizing the church. And it is not in the interests of the church's fulfilling its mission to get itself unnecessarily entangled in controversial issues. Controversy, of course, is to a degree in the eye of the beholder. A church's

leadership must know their flock well enough to know what sorts of issues might engender controversy.

At the same time, it shouldn't be difficult for a church to become aware of a rich abundance of service opportunities it could commend to its people. To name a few: the local crisis pregnancy center, a suicide prevention hotline, Meals on Wheels, tutoring, a homeless shelter or soup kitchen, a substance abuse clinic, a human trafficking halfway house, and a hospital or hospice companionship. It is hard to imagine that commending these sorts of opportunities would be the cause of any division or strife and would not be gladly received by the people in the church irrespective of their diversity and various leanings. And it would have the beneficial effect of publically conveying the church's (and God's) concern for human need and suffering and the value of loving our neighbors.

Thesis #10

While it will not always be easy to determine the line of demarcation between the church's undertaking particular functions and its equipping disciples to undertake those functions, two basic restrictions will apply: the church may

not fund activities that are not part of its mission

And the church may not implement and oversee ministries which are not part of its mission.

Perhaps the reader is familiar with the Fallacy of the Beard. Since a beard grows on a man's face incrementally and gradually, and since therefore there is no one point in time where we can say, "Now he has a beard," therefore it

is meaningless to speak of beardedness and non-beardedness. Well, that is nonsense. Of course it is meaningful to distinguish between having a beard and not having a beard, even though the progression from the latter to the former is gradual.

In the same way, the church's relationships to activities not properly within the purview of its mission exist along a continuum: everything from wholesale adoption to distance and even disavowal. It is possible to move gradually along the continuum. And in the middle range of the continuum it may be difficult to tell ("Does he have a beard or does he not?") whether the relationship is an appropriate one or not. But this does not mean that it is nonsensical to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate relationships. It simply means that there is a grey, ambiguous region in the middle where judgment calls will be difficult.

In between wholesale adoption and complete rejection there are many intermediate steps. For example, let us suppose that a given church believes it is inappropriate for it to run a Christian school. But could the church leadership encourage their members to send their children to that particular school? Could they announce an open house for the school during the church's announcements? Could the church display school literature on an information rack? As can be seen, there are a number of intermediate options that may not be clear cut and therefore will be left to the prudential judgment of the church.

The political sphere is another interesting one. Let us assume, for the sake of discussion, that we agree that First Presbyterian Church should not

endorse, say, Hillary Clinton for President; it cannot instruct its members to vote for her. But what *can* the church do? Can it do anything at all? Can it host an informational meeting? Can it publish the Mrs. Clinton's positions? Can it provide an allegedly non-partisan voter's guide which has the effect of steering people toward the candidate? For myself, I am more uneasy about the church's association with the political realm than the educational realm.

Every four years, when people are becoming more mindful of elections than they ordinarily are, it is not uncommon in many of our PCA churches for members to request that the church distribute a non-partisan prolife voter's guide. As a pastor, I have always declined the opportunity. And it has nothing to do with any uneasiness on my part with the church's taking a prolife stance. My concern with the prolife voter's guide is that it (a) implicitly tells people that they ought to vote, and (b) implies that, if they do vote, the single issue of abortion should determine how they cast their vote. In my judgment, the church is at liberty to do neither.

There will thus be a number of situations where the church's leadership will simply have to make a judgment call. And we should expect reasonable people to disagree as to where the lines are drawn from church to church. However, I would suggest that there are two criteria that can be applied with some degree of confidence: funding and oversight.

The monies entrusted to the visible church are to be used for the legitimate purposes of the church and no others. They may not, in the interests of generosity or helpfulness or supporting a worthy cause, be used for anything else.

The church may not support a local Boy Scouts troop. The church may not support the local food pantry. The church may not contribute to a community fund which seeks to promote the arts. And, as I indicated in the first few pages of this thesis-project, the church may not support the local crisis pregnancy center. One ought to be able to review a church budget and, going line by line, be confident that every dollar may be reasonably interpreted as going toward the legitimate purposes and mission of the Christian church.

With respect to oversight, the church leadership should not be governing activities and ministries not within the purview of the church's mission. In the words of the Westminster Confession, the church is "to handle, or conclude nothing, but that which is ecclesiastical." Individual church leaders may have their strong opinions; they may serve on other governing bodies (such as boards of directors) that *do* oversee these other ministries. But the church *itself* should have no supervisory role whatsoever. To do otherwise is not merely a violation of principle but also a waste of the resources of time and emotional and mental energy.

Thesis #11

The church must resist the temptation to be relevant.

One of the reasons the topic of this study is timely is that we live in a day and an age (and of course have for some time) in which the relevance of the church is increasingly called into question. We Christians seem, especially to others, to inhabit a world of arcane doctrines and theological niceties and ancient

stories. We speak of the other worldly, the eternal. We, and our church, seem detached from the most pressing and difficult problems people face, with nothing to offer to the broken and the suffering, the oppressed and the forgotten. So there has always been a clamoring for the church to change and adapt in the direction of relevance. This clamoring has come both from within and from without.

The church, motivated by a range of considerations, everything from genuine compassion to numerical growth, practically falls over itself in its effort to prove its relevance. From various mercy ministries to seminars on potty training (yes, really) to substance abuse recovery programs, the church is bound and determined to demonstrate that it has something to say to the very practical day-to-day issues that confront people. This desire to be relevant also accounts in part for the tendency of churches to wade neck deep into the culture wars, to become politicized, and to become enmeshed in issues of social justice.

That last sentence paints, of course, with a very broad brush. Even from the vantage point of a narrow construction of the church's mission, we do not doubt for a second the legitimacy of the church's having a prophetic voice on some of these issues. Our concern here is that the concern to be relevant draws the church into the fray of being practical in an indiscriminate and undiscerning way. Certainly in some cases the church gives in to the fear of man, which is a snare (Proverbs 29:25), and a desire to please man rather than God. As was mentioned above, it is instructive to note the contrast between pleasing people and serving people. In Galatians 1, Paul makes the point that if he were seeking to please people, he would no longer be a servant of Christ. In his apostolic ministry

he sought to please God, not people; when it came to people, he sought to serve them. He understood that, at times, pleasing God means *displeasing* people, even as you serve people.

What people *want* the church to do should not be determinative. What people feel the church needs to do in order to be practical or authentic or credible, while important to weigh and consider, should not be regarded as authoritative. The church should do what God calls it to do *even if* it is branded by some as being irrelevant or out of touch. Surely this is one implication of the foolishness of the gospel, the foolishness of the cross.

No one is suggesting that the diverse panoply comprised of people's sufferings, trials, and perplexities is not important and should not be addressed. Who wishes to deny that children, after all, do need to be potty trained? But the Christian church as an institution of Christ takes its aim at a particular kind of practical concern: people's alienation from God and their need of a redeemer. To us, escaping the wrath that is to come, being forgiven for our sins, receiving a perfect and imputed righteousness, being adopted as the beloved children of God, and having a hope that can never perish, spoil or fade—these are all eminently practical and relevant and timely matters. There is nothing irrelevant or impractical about one's eternal relationship with the Living God. So the church, rather than acceding to clamorous demands, should recommit itself to fulfilling its God-ordained mission and labor, prayerfully, humbly, and energetically, to display to the world the relevance that inheres in the proclamation of the gospel and the making of disciples.

Thesis #12

**The church must resist the temptation to hide behind what is safe, familiar,
and comfortable.**

Lastly, there is a danger that runs in the opposite direction to the fear of man referenced above. It is perhaps simply a different kind of fear. And this fear is perhaps of greatest danger to those who are attracted to the doctrine of the spirituality of the church, the limited scope of its mission. It is the fear of the unknown and the unfamiliar. It is the fear of taking risks. It is the fear of change. It is the fear of people who are not like us. It is the fear that “the surprising work of God” (to recall Jonathan Edwards’ description of revival in Northampton) might actually upend our lives and make us profoundly *uncomfortable* and desperately dependent upon God.

Sadly, there appears to be a noticeable correlation between a commitment to the spirituality of the church and a conspicuous disengagement from the messiness and brokenness of the lives of sinners. To be sure, there are exceptions, perhaps *many* exceptions. But there is enough of a correlation to wonder if this particular view of the church’s mission is something that Presbyterians hide behind. Is it so preposterous to suggest that, for some at least, the spirituality of the church serves as a protective covering, masking our cowardice, our indifference, our laziness, our love of ease, even our racism?

As I write, it is the summer of 2015. At the recent meeting of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in American, there was a very significant discussion of our denomination’s need to repent of its history of racism; racism

manifested not merely by our forefathers in the Southern Presbyterian church of the nineteenth century, but by our forefathers *and us* in the civil rights era and its aftermath. This discussion is well chronicled in “The Protest of 2015.”³ The history itself is nicely summarized by Sean Lucas in “Race and the Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America.”⁴ And the student of these matters should take careful note of Anthony Bradley’s “Why Did It Take 50 Years for Calvinists to Care about Race? How the Mainline Saved Evangelicalism.”⁵ As we in the PCA increasingly come to terms with our past—and our present—there is ample need for us to review our conduct, repent of our sins, and renew our commitment loving to proclaim the gospel to all peoples and to incorporate them, *welcome them*, into the visible church.

This is not a study of race, race relations, and racism, broad and momentous topics in and of themselves. These are simply raised as an illustration. It is unlikely that the coincidence of the mistreatment of black people and the embracing of the spirituality of the church is accidental or incidental. There is likely a connection. Are we saying that a belief in the limited scope of the church’s mission necessarily leads to racism?

3. Timothy R. LeCroy, “The Protest of 2015,” *Vita pastoralis* (blog), June 15, 2015, accessed September 1, 2016, <https://pastortimlecroy.wordpress.com/2015/06/15/the-protest-of-2015>.

4. Sean Lucas, “Race and the Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America, no. 1-5,” *Ref21 Blog [reformation 21] [Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals]*, February 10, 2015, accessed September 1, 2016, <http://www.reformation21.org/blog/sean-lucas/>. Lucas’ arguments are further developed in his forthcoming *For a Continuing Church: The Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America*.

5. Anthony Bradley, “Why Did It Take 50 Years for Calvinists to Care about Race? How the Mainline Saved Evangelicalism,” *Anthony Bradley* (blog), June 13, 2015, accessed September 1, 2016, <http://www.dranthonybradley.com/why-did-it-take-50-years-for-calvinists-to-care-about-race>.

Emphatically, no. But does such a view of the church's mission provide an all-too-convenient excuse for and justification of racism? Emphatically, yes.

There will be other issues that come to mind, that come into play as we seek to be God's faithful people. In all of them, we must be aware of the ever-present danger of manufacturing theological excuses for and justifications of our sin, of using a finely-tuned ecclesiology to insulate us from people and their needs.

One is reminded in this connection of Jesus' indictment of the Pharisees for finding religious justification for neglecting the needs of one's parents (Mark 7:9-13). By labeling what otherwise would have been given to one's parents as Corban (a gift devoted to God), these people in fact failed to honor mother and father. Jesus said that they made void the word of God by the tradition they have handed down. He concluded by saying, "And many such things you do."

Is it suggesting too much that there is no group of Christians in our day more adroit at this than Reformed Presbyterians? We have a wonderful and extraordinary theological heritage for which we should be most grateful. But any good gift can be misused and abused. Strengths can become weaknesses, assets can become liabilities. In my embracing and setting forth the first eleven theses of this chapter, I am given reason to pause by this twelfth thesis. And wonder about the ways in which we, in which *I*, have used my view of the church's mission to avoid duty and evade responsibility.

CHAPTER 5

TOWARD A MORE FAITHFUL MISSION IN PROVIDENCE

My hope is that the material in Chapters 1-4 will be of some modest benefit to Christians and churches in different cultures and settings and a variety of ecclesiastical contexts. In this final chapter, I want to focus on the particular and the more overtly practical in relation to my pastoral ministry context. How should the understanding of the church's mission set forth heretofore be brought to bear in the life and ministry of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Providence, Rhode Island?

Here I would like to take an approach that is less definitive, more expansive and imaginative. In short, I would like to dream. What might, what could, our church's ministry look like if we were "no more, no less?" In other words, if Trinity Presbyterian Church's mission was *no more* than the church's mission as warranted by the Word of God, but neither was it *any less*, what would the shape and contours of the ministry be?

I should begin by making the practical observation that it is unlikely that any local church, no matter how large or diverse, no matter what resources it has at its disposal, could possibly bring full expression to every legitimate dimension of the church's mission. Choices and concessions will have to be made. Good ministries will have to be foregone in the interests of the church's channeling its energies in the most effective and God-honoring way.

That being said, it is surely the case that, for any individual church, achieving its potential, fulfilling its calling, will be characterized by a certain breadth and depth. There will be a certain fullness, a multi-dimensional quality that reflects the church's whole-hearted commitment to *being* the church in that particular community. The perennial

temptation to be narrow, truncated, and safe must be challenged by a fuller conception and vision of what the church of Jesus Christ is called to be.

Where We Came From

A brief overview of Trinity's origins and history will help provide a sense of its unique identity, which, in turn, will have a bearing upon its sense of mission. Trinity began as Berea Presbyterian Church in the town of Barrington, Rhode Island, an upscale suburb of Providence on the east side of the Narragansett Bay. It was planted by the New England Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church in America in the late 1980s. While for some time the church experienced growth and effectiveness, it entered into a period of difficulty in the mid-1990s and was de-particularized (i.e., it returned to mission church status).

The church was replanted and renamed Trinity Presbyterian Church. Under the leadership of the new church planter, the church was moved to Providence with the goal of being a church in and for the city. It is perhaps useful to note the core values which were adopted at the time and continue to this day:

A Christ-Centered Church – To be a church centered on our common faith in Jesus Christ, which embraces God's people from the diverse cultural, ethnic, educational and socio-economic backgrounds in our region.

An Authentic Worship – To truly worship in a way that pleases God, engages the hearts of believers, and draws unbelievers to faith in Christ.

A Welcoming Spiritual Community – To lovingly lead sinners toward life-long allegiance to Christ through baptism, the Lord's Supper, and church membership.

Living by Truth and Grace – To shepherd God’s people toward Christ-like living through a growing knowledge and love of God as revealed in the Bible and motivated by His grace.

A Church-Planting Mission – To fulfill Christ’s command to make disciples of all nations by planting churches.

A City-Focused Vision – To focus our mission and resources on the needs and opportunities of metro-Providence.

While it can be debated how faithfully Trinity has reflected these values over the years, it is certainly the case that they have always been part of our DNA.

Two significant influences during Trinity’s early years are worth noting. First, shortly after beginning a college ministry on the campuses of Brown University and The Rhode Island School of Design (this was under the auspices of Reformed University Ministries, the campus ministry of the PCA), Trinity merged with a Korean American church that had been meeting on the Brown campus. This resulted in a significant influx of young adults and young Asians in particular. While presenting certain challenges in terms of blending two distinct church cultures, this merger was a great boon to Trinity’s diversity and has impacted the church’s demographic profile to this day.

Second, my predecessor played a pivotal role in helping a number of Liberian families immigrate to the Providence area. As they arrived, many became assimilated into the life of the church. One of them serves on the diaconate and is pursuing his theological training. Every year the church’s summer children’s outreach is aimed specifically at the children of the Liberian community, always with a high level of

participation. While there has been an ebb and flow to the level of Liberian involvement at Trinity over the years, the number has always been significant and noteworthy and has increased as of late.

Where We Are

While pastors are, in a certain sense, always thinking about the current state of their churches and ministries, seldom is there the need to write it down in any sort of comprehensive way. But this is what I'm forced to think through as this thesis-project draws to a close. Here I want to be both descriptive and evaluative; and, to the extent that I am evaluative (with whatever modicum of objectivity I am able to muster), this section will lay part of the groundwork for the final section which looks toward the future of the church.

Worship

The most obvious and visible thing that Trinity does is gather for worship on the Lord's Day. Emphasis is placed upon the belief that this is the most important thing we do as a church. It is a service that can be described as full-orbed and semi-liturgical (reflecting some of the elements that one might see in a full-blown Anglican liturgy but not all), seeking to incorporate some contemporary elements in an essentially traditional format. In general the service can be characterized as God-centered (with a conspicuous focus on the character and redemptive deeds of our Triune God), dialogical (reflecting an alternation between our speaking to God and God's speaking to us), covenantal (a rite in which God renews his covenant with us and we renew our allegiance to the Lord of the

covenant), and corporate/participatory (stressing that the worshipers are not simply part of an “audience” but rather are actively engaged as part of a people offering their worship to God).

We seek to strike balances in our worship between the transcendent and the immanent (proclaiming a God who is both high and lifted up and an ever-present help and friend) and the objective and the subjective (stressing that worship consists of activities that we *do* without neglecting the engagement of the heart and the emotions). We seek to be relevant, making sure the eternal verities of the Word of God are brought to bear upon the lives people actually live. We seek to do so without being trendy, that is eschewing the fads and fashions that churches often embrace in an effort to keep up with the times. And we seek to tie ourselves explicitly to the church catholic in its breadth and historical depth (employing prayers and hymns that have been around for many hundreds of years, using historical confessions of faith, etc.). In so doing we eschew a worship experience that would reek of “hereness and nowness,” coined words to capture the historical and geographical particularity to which churches often unwittingly limit themselves.

We seek to have a service that is biblically rich. Sermons are expository, both in terms of engaging the biblical text and respecting the literary structure of the word of God, ordinarily translating into my preaching through entire biblical books. Sermons are also redemptive-historical, seeking to handle the text in light of the broader metanarrative of God’s redeeming work in Christ.

The culmination of the service is the weekly celebration of Lord’s Supper.

Far from being simply the next element in the service, the Lord's Supper is, in a very real sense, an application of the word that has just been preached. It is an opportunity for God's people to respond in faith as Christ nourishes them through this means of grace. It is the high point of the service in which everything "comes together" and the central realities of the gospel are reaffirmed.

I have always believed that our service of worship, while always subject to improvement, is one of Trinity's strengths. It is, by God's grace, something that we do at least reasonably well.

Christian Education

Prior to worship, we have a Christian education program for everyone from toddlers through adults. The children's education is particularly well thought through, due largely to the faithful labors of our church's ministry coordinator who has devoted many years to developing curriculum. Preschool children are introduced to Bible stories. Elementary age students cover the history of redemption and memorize the Westminster Shorter Catechism. In Junior High, students study the catechism in detail. Senior High students review the history of redemption, are introduced to church history, and learn how to defend their faith.

Classes for adults, while not nearly as well organized from a programmatic perspective, seek to cover a broad range of topics over the course of time. While we always want to be practical, recently there has been an effort to offer adult education options that *appear to be* practical in addition to *actually being* practical. We have,

lamentably, had something of a history of offering classes that perhaps aimed too high and didn't adequately appeal to those younger in the faith.

Community

I think that, to a significant degree, genuine Christian community is present at Trinity, both formally and informally. We have a decent number of people involved in community groups which meet several times a month for prayer, mutual encouragement, and study. Four such groups exist at present and my sense is that those who attend do so out of a genuine desire to live out the Christian life together.

More broadly it is my observation that the saints at Trinity live authentic, unpretentious lives in community with one another. No one is putting on airs, none is seeking to impress. They care for each other, meet one another's needs, and seem genuinely to enjoy being involved in one another's lives. To the congregation's credit, I think that newcomers sense the genuineness of our community when they walk through the doors, which, in turn, dovetails into our outreach efforts.

Outreach and Evangelism

While we are in many ways a very hospitable and welcoming church, I think deliberate outreach and evangelism have been significant shortcomings over the life of the church. Yes, we have people sharing Christ with their friends and neighbors. But I think we rely too heavily and even, at times, exclusively on the public proclamation of the word on the Lord's Day. To be sure, such a means of evangelism is not to be disparaged. And I have long been a big believer in so-called doxological evangelism,

whereby Christ and his fullness are presented to the unbeliever within the rich context of Christian worship. But I fear we rely on that a bit too heavily and don't force ourselves to pursue other avenues.

Thankfully, there have been some exceptions. For example, we have regularly had a team of people visit the Providence Rescue Mission, a homeless shelter with an explicitly Christian mission. Our team goes with the specific goal of sharing the gospel with the homeless. And one of the highlights of our ministry is Backyard Bible Club, a VBS that we run for children in the Liberian community. Year in and year out it is *packed* with enthusiastic children and volunteers where, through food, games, singing, and brief messages, Christ crucified is proclaimed to dozens and dozens of children.

Campus Ministry

For many years we have had a very close working relationship with Reformed University Fellowship, the campus ministry of the PCA, on the campuses of Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design, with outreach to Johnson and Wales University on the horizon. Initially, RUF was formally under the oversight of Trinity, with the campus pastor being on the staff of the church. Recently, however, we transitioned to a presbytery affiliation: the ministry reports to Southern New England Presbytery, not Trinity. Regardless, as a practical matter RUF is an extension of Trinity and represents an extraordinary opportunity to reach students from all over the world.

World Missions

In large part because Trinity has been so heavily invested in RUF over the years, a visible commitment to world missions has been commensurately lacking. Part of the reasoning has been that, since we can only do so much, and since, providentially, we have this opportunity with RUF, much of the energy and financial support that otherwise would have gone toward world missions has gone to campus ministry. So while in one sense we are certainly committed to the cause of global evangelization, and while such commitment is reflected in the church's teaching ministry, we do not at present support any missionaries. We have recognized that this skewing toward campus ministry is something of an imbalance and we are working toward more of a demonstrable commitment to supporting foreign missionaries and promoting missions awareness. Over the last several years we have had a couple of well-attended missions conferences to educate the congregation and highlight the importance of foreign missions. And, for 2017, plans are in the works for a missions trip to Belize.

Church Planting

Certainly one of the highlights of Trinity's ministry has been the planting of two daughter churches. First there was Christ Our Hope Presbyterian Church in Wakefield, RI. Beginning with a core group of several families, it has grown into a solid, stable, and faithful church. More recently has been the planting of Grace Presbyterian Church in Worcester, MA. Currently in mission church status, Grace has begun morning worship services and shows promise in being a vital witness to the gospel. We certainly hope

that, as our emphasis on world missions is increased, we do not lose our historic focus on domestic church planting.

General Evaluation

As I enter the twelfth year of my pastorate at Trinity, and as I think about this ministry that I have helped shape, I am constrained to think through how fully we conform to the ideals for the church set forth in the word of God. While there is a sense in which this sort of assessment should be and is ongoing and continuous, this thesis-project has of course forced me to give the matter my focused and sustained attention. As I, perhaps more so than anyone else, have played such an influential role in what we do and do not do as a church, it is probably my instinct to be self-justifying and self-protective to some degree. The potential result of this is an evaluation of the church on my part that is skewed too positively. Yes, it is Christ's church; but there is a sense in which it is "my baby," as it were, and, as such, is a reflection upon me, my priorities, my faithfulness as a gospel minister. All I can do, I suppose, is acknowledge these biases and seek to be as rigorously honest and candid as I can possibly be.

Thinking in terms of no more and no less (i.e. going beyond or falling short of the church's mission), I think I can say with confidence that there is very little likelihood that we, as a church, have done *more* than is warranted by Scripture (or by our constitutional standards). We are apolitical to a fault, bending over backwards never to say anything that might be construed as supporting political candidates, parties, or platforms. We have always kept a very safe and comfortable distance from wading into the cultures wars, even to the extent of running the risk of appearing to be disengaged or afraid to broach

certain topics. (One of the things we are quick to point out to people is our willingness to address any one of a number of difficult biblical topics without any hesitation or reservation. Thus our silence on issues that do not fall within the purview of the church's mission, such as particular public policy approaches to abortion or gay marriage, or taking a firm stand on some news item that is on everyone's mind, is not to be explained in terms of fear or a reluctance to engage but, rather, in terms of our sense the limits of the church's mission.) On the issue of benevolences, while we have often informed the congregation of general benevolences (i.e., opportunities for benevolence irrespective of religious identity) that might be of interest to them as individuals, we have not used church resources for such purposes. On the matter of approaches to education, we have steadfastly refused to endorse or promote one particular approach to the exclusion of others, even in subtle ways. Our position has been that one cannot argue from Scripture for or against private school, home school, or public school. We have been conscientious in not suggesting, even in subtle ways, that one approach is to be preferred over another. Finally, on the issue of the sanctity of human life, we have always been clear that abortion is the unjustifiable taking of human life. But, as I alluded to earlier in this study, we have been very careful not to speak about abortion in such a way as to be endorsing particular public policy positions.

I suspect, however, that this care we have taken to do *no more* as a church than is warranted by Scripture has resulted in our doing *somewhat less* as a church than is warranted by Scripture. Isn't this often the case? The wariness of one extreme hazards the risk of the opposite extreme. To lean away from one thing is to lean toward another. What I think we need to grapple with as a church is the possibility that we have "played it

too safe” over the years, that we have been overly risk averse, that we have failed to pursue opportunities to expand the kingdom of God in Providence. One can only guess as to all the motives of the heart that have, collectively, contributed to this posture of safety. Fear, pride, love of the familiar, and a desire for order and predictability are a few that come to mind.

Who is the enemy? That is a question that is often posed to identify which alternative among several is likely to be the greatest danger, especially when there is the strong position that the wrong enemy is being identified. In the case of Trinity Presbyterian Church, the enemy is decidedly *not* the danger of becoming bemired in all manner of activities outside the scope of the church’s mission. With the current cast of characters, the current leadership, there is very little possibility of the church’s squandering and spreading its resources to indiscriminate charities; or becoming politicized and beholden to partisan politics; or getting ensnared in the agenda of the culture wars.

This is not to say that we need to ignore completely these dangers. So-called “mission creep” is always a danger to be aware of, whether it has to do with a military campaign or a church initiative. And who knows? Perhaps twenty years from now Trinity will have long since succumbed to the mission-expanding pressures of contemporary church culture. But surely there’s no *imminent* danger of such. Everything about our church culture and sense of mission militates against this sort of broadening that results in a church’s doing more than it is called to do.

No...our “enemy,” if we can call it that, is the tendency to be so concerned that we are not transgressing the proper limits of the church’s mission that we fail to pursue

strategies and activities which would, in fact, be perfectly legitimate. As an analogy, we are afraid of falling off the edge of a cliff so we don't go anywhere near the edge. It is too risky in our view to walk right along the edge so we leave a wide berth, maybe 100 feet or so. But here's the question: what ministry opportunities, *legitimate God-honoring and God-pleasing opportunities*, are missed, are left on the table, by never getting any closer than 100 feet? Would there be wisdom in traversing the ground closer to the edge in an effort to be more faithful to our mission? Perhaps, in the case of our particular church with our distinct set of proclivities and leanings, we would do well to take some risks, live with greater ambiguity, get our hands dirtier than we are accustomed to, push the envelope a bit.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones once made the point that, if you are preaching the gospel faithfully, you will from time to time be accused of antinomianism. Why? Your proclamations of the free grace of God in Christ are so full and inviting that, to some, sometimes, it sounds as if you are an antinomian...even though, in fact, you are not. But if, over the course of a long ministry spanning decades, you are never once accused of being an antinomian, then chances are you have not preached the free grace of the gospel with sufficient clarity and power.

All of which makes me wonder: decades from now, will we as a church ever have been accused of transgressing the proper boundaries and limits of the mission of the church? Will we, in our fearless and loving efforts to fulfill our mission, appear at times, in the estimation of some, to be doing *more* than God has warranted in his word? Will we, in our zeal to expand the kingdom of God, be branded as, at times, doing too much

rather than too little? Because of the culture in our church that has developed over many years, I do not think there is any realistic likelihood of this being the case.

No one is suggesting, of course, that it's right to do wrong; that it is permissible to expand the church's mission beyond what God has prescribed in his word. The point is simply that a church, in seeking to do *no less* than Christ has commanded, in walking closer to the edge of the cliff, as it were, will from time to time either *appear* to do more or *actually* do more. My contention is that, as we continue to evolve as a church and become more faithful in fulfilling our mission, we will need to do some things that bring us closer to the edge.

A biblical text that comes to mind is the parable of the talents (Mt. 25:14-30). Remember the man who buried his one talent? Is there the danger that churches of our ilk and inclinations border on burying the one talent with which we have been entrusted? Is it possible that our conception of our stewardship of the gospel runs the risk of failing to invest in the Great Commission, of failing to seize opportunities for kingdom faithfulness and effectiveness? These are the sorts of hard and uncomfortable questions that churches like Trinity need to ask. And these are the sorts of hard and uncomfortable questions that ministers such as I need to ask.

What Shall We Become?

I began this study with both an academic interest in the scope of the church's mission and a practical interest in the scope of Trinity's ministry. Having concluded that the danger for Trinity lies in its ministry being too narrow rather than too broad, I want to engage in a bit of dreaming and imagining as to what our ministry might look like if it

were fuller and more expansive. Not all of the below consists of concrete recommendations of things we need to do now. I would like the reader to think of what the evolution of our church could look like over the next ten to twenty years if we make a commitment to our mission being *no less* than what Christ has in mind for us.

One factor that will help foster a broader and more diverse ministry is decentralization. My observation is that Trinity has long reflected a culture in which ideas for ministry are generated from the top down as opposed to the bottom up. The culture of the church is such that people defer and look to the pastor and elders as the most likely source of new ideas. One result of this is that we have not created a climate in which new ideas and initiatives on the part of the church membership as a whole are encouraged.

Now, to be fair, there has been some improvement over the years. And to the extent that this culture has been perpetuated, I have no doubt that I have been partially responsible. But to the extent that it is perpetuated, it does not seem likely that we will be able to take advantage of the diversity of insights and hearts for ministry represented in the congregation.

To clarify, I have no doubt that pastors and elders have a leadership role and that, in fact, many new ideas should and will be generated by them. And the church session certainly does have a governing and overseeing role that will not permit the indiscriminate implementation of every new idea. But these factors need to exist in a climate that expressly encourages the congregation, under the ministry of word and Spirit and within the constitutional parameters of our church, to take initiative, to dream and experiment, and to have the freedom to fail.

It seems to me that part of our church culture is that whatever we do must be “just so.” It’s as though many people have this heightened sensitivity and consciously or unconsciously ask, “What will the pastor think? Will the elders approve? Is this idea or that ministry proposal sufficiently Reformed?” As such, this is not a bad thing. But I do wonder whether this sentiment exists to such a degree that it squelches people’s being led by the Spirit to exercise their gifts.

Thus I think we need to find ways to encourage people to take initiative and even push the envelope a bit. This can be done both publicly and privately. And it can be done proactively and reactively. We can seek people out and encourage them to pursue new ministries. And, when people come to us, we can go out of our way to find ways to accommodate what they have in mind.

This approach will, in turn, be best facilitated by having leaders who are attuned to the importance of creating a climate that encourages the exercise of a diversity of gifts. This will involve, to varying degrees, self-examination and changes of attitude and behavior on the part of current leaders. And it will involve taking care to appoint new leaders, whether staff or ordained leadership, who share this commitment to a more expansive approach. Needless to say, this culture change will be a long-term proposition.

Before providing a thumbnail sketch of what we might do in the future, I wanted to accent the unusual opportunity we have at this juncture in the development of the City of Providence. Several years ago, I-195, which had been routed immediately adjacent to our facility, was rerouted significantly farther south. This resulted in a number of sizeable parcels of land in and around our facility which were to be subject to some sort of significant future development. After waiting a number of years to see what might

happen, there appears to be significant movement at the beginning of 2016. Specifically, the I-195 Redevelopment Commission announced that it signed sale and purchase agreements for a 1 million square foot development project. The goal is a life sciences complex which is to include “research facilities, labs, office spaces, and even a restaurant and hotel.” All of this is to happen on parcels of land that are immediately adjacent to Trinity.

The point of this very brief excursus into the development of downtown Providence is to highlight the fact that Trinity, once on the edge and in an area of the city in which there was no new development, is now poised to be in the very middle of very significant growth. And it’s not simply the scale and location of the growth that is important; it’s the *kind* of growth. Our part of the city historically has been known as the Jewelry District because of the number of jewelry manufacturing businesses that were found here years ago. (In fact, our facility is actually a gutted and renovated jewelry manufacturing building.) But now, with the relocation of the Brown medical school a mere several hundred feet from us and a variety of biotech firms, the area has been dubbed The Knowledge District. To be sure, it is a bit pretentious sounding. But it does reflect the degree to which the immediate vicinity of Trinity is becoming a center for different fields of scientific inquiry.

As exciting and momentous as these developments clearly are, they simply serve to augment the opportunities that have existed for some time: the close proximity of Brown and RISD, the immediate proximity of Johnson and Wales University, and virtually all of the state government offices which are within easy walking distance of Trinity. In short, God in his providence has situated us strategically *in* Providence. It is

difficult to imagine how a church could be better positioned by way of a crossroads of culture, ideas, and influence than Trinity is. These considerations serve to highlight the peculiar stewardship which God has entrusted to us and the almost limitless opportunities for ministry which it presents.

Originally, I thought that the way to complete this thesis would be to provide an inventory of strategies and initiatives which, based upon my understanding of the mission of the church in light of Scripture and the constitution of the PCA and my sense of where Trinity is in its development as a church, would help us in our efforts to be *no less* than what Christ calls us to be. (Again, my assumption is that we run little risk of doing *more* than Christ commands). While not denying the utility of such a list, it strikes me as a bit staid and, well, boring, especially as the conclusion to a project which I hope to be not merely informative but inspiring.

What I would like to do instead is to share a dream, a vision. I would set forth an imagined description of the church as it might exist 25 years from now, a time at which, I assume, I will have long since departed, whether by the pursuit of another call, retirement, or death. But I would like to think that my ministry, in however many years I have left at Trinity, will help chart a course toward a more fully-orbed gospel ministry. So, as I close my eyes and look at Trinity in the year 2041, what do I see?

I see many of the things that I see today. I see a diverse group of people gathering for worship on the Lord's Day, singing praises and offering heartfelt prayers, receiving the word of God read and preached, and communing with their Lord at the Holy Supper. I see outsiders drawn into public worship because they sense there is something compelling and authentic happening within our four walls. I see people

gathering for studies and classes of one kind or another: elementary school students learning about the history of redemption and the Christ of Scripture, middle school students becoming grounded in the doctrines of the Shorter Catechism, high school students learning to defend their faith against the worldly philosophies that would seek to draw them away from the simplicity of Christ. I see adults learning from Tedd Tripp how to shepherd a child's heart, from John Bunyan about the journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City, from Ken Sande how to follow Jesus as peacemakers.

I see college students taking their Saturday mornings to tutor Liberian children. I see a backyard in South Providence filled with children on a hot summer morning as they sing and do crafts and make friends and learn about a glorious and loving Redeemer. I see men taking time out of their week to go to the Providence Rescue Mission and share the gospel with the homeless.

I see frail, ailing, suffering saints, buffeted and battered and beleaguered by the trials of this life. And I see God's people rallying around them, weeping with those who weep, bearing one another's burdens and so fulfilling the Law of Christ. I see a vital and active diaconal ministry that promotes the communion of the saints with joy and alacrity.

I see people gathering regularly in one another's homes for meals, for prayer, for engaging one another in discussing the preached word. I see communal Christianity lived out from house to house exhibiting the rich and diverse ministering of one to another envisioned in the New Testament.

What a joy it is to recount many of the things I see *today* at Trinity! May they be ever and increasingly present in our congregational life! May we be ever vigilant to

ensure that these sorts of things remain part of the Trinity story from one generation to the next.

But I see new things as well, things that I haven't seen before, things that I don't see now. In some cases it is a matter of degree: dimensions of church life once evidenced by the very faintest of traces, now exhibited with a fullness and a vibrancy previously unknown. But in other cases it is a matter of ministry that is new altogether, unprecedented in Trinity's life, at least during my tenure as senior pastor. So, what else do I see?

I see a variety of efforts underway to convey the good news of the gospel in the context of addressing people's day-to-day, this-world needs and questions. Very specifically, I do *not* see the church engaging in general benevolences, activities defined in terms of neighbor love (although, of course, I see the members of the church, individually and in various associated capacities, loving their neighbors in a variety of ways). The things I see are explicit in their intention to make disciples; there is not even a hint of "bait and switch," of concealing the goal to proclaim the gospel. Nonetheless, the media and contexts through and in which the gospel is being conveyed make ample use of addressing people's felt and temporal needs.

What do I see in particular in this regard? I see a variety of small group studies addressing questions such as grief and marriage and raising children and divorce and addiction and retirement planning. They all have the very obvious appeal of addressing a felt need, a practical (in the narrow sense) issue. But they all *also* are framed in such a manner as to display the relevance of the gospel.

I see a vibrant biblical counseling ministry operating out of our facility. While not directly a ministry of the church, it is supported by the church as an extension of the church's ministry of the word and as a means of providing the kind of extensive and intensive counseling that is beyond the capabilities of our staff.

I see a calendar punctuated by a diverse variety of speakers and conferences and debates. I see a church that is a cordial host to men and women representing different points of view on topics and themes that serve as points of contact between people's intellectual lives and Christian faith. Whether it is the conference on bioethics, the debate on how media technologies shape our lives, or the lecture series on aesthetics, these and other events draw the community to the church and promote thoughtful engagement and dialogue.

I see a church that is very actively engaged in helping its members to pursue their callings with biblical wisdom. While steering far away from offering classes in small engine repair, floral arrangement, and basic accounting, there is nonetheless a concerted and deliberate effort to help Christians think and talk through how biblical ethics and wisdom govern and shape the fulfillment of their callings. What does it mean to be a Christian surgeon? How does the practice of law reflect a commitment to biblical truth? What do Christian witness and faithfulness look like for the man who labors in a machine shop? Trinity's members, no matter what their worldly callings, are being equipped to glorify God in all that they do.

I see a church, while deliberately choosing not to be a benevolent society (responsible for neighbor love in its varied expressions), nonetheless being proactive in helping its members to participate in existing benevolent societies and form new

benevolent societies. This, in my judgment, is within the purview and orbit of making disciples and provides believers with the impetus they need to make a difference in their world. These benevolent societies may or may not be populated exclusively by Christians. Some may reflect a broad array of religious convictions. Individual disciples use their own best judgment, informed by Scripture and the victory/safety that comes from a multitude of counselors, to decide which kinds of alliances they can form. Crisis pregnancy centers, legal advocacy groups, relief organizations, and Habitat for Humanity teams are the sorts of organizations which Trinity might encourage its people to pursue.

I see a church that has become a satellite campus for theological education. Students unable to travel as far north as Boston or as far south as New York, and unable to be in residence at a seminary, are taking courses at an extension of, dare I say, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, with which Trinity is partnering to accommodate the education needs of the next generation of church leaders.

I see a robust commitment to church planting: a commitment evidenced not simply by the two churches planted years ago continuing to thrive, but by a multiplication of churches in the greater Providence area and in such a manner that reflects the ethnic diversity of Providence. Not only is there Trinity and two or three similar churches planted within a thirty miles radius, but there are several congregations within Providence proper able to reach unique populations. I see a Liberian congregation pastored by the man who once served as a Trinity deacon and underwent his theological education through LAMP, a distance learning seminary. And I see several other congregations serving demographic and ethnic pockets of Providence that Trinity has been unable to reach.

I see a church that is not only demonstrably committed to world missions, supporting four or five couples to a significant degree, but I see a *sending church*. I see a church that has so caught the “contagion” of the global cause of Christ that its own members are not simply *supporting*, but are *going*: going to foreign fields for short-term projects, two-year projects, and “projects” that will last the remainder of their working lives.

I thus see quite a few things that I do not currently see. And what I see is flourishing in a downtown Providence that has literally grown around the church. My vision of the future is optimistic and perhaps unrealistic. If and when this vision is realized, in all probability I will no longer be playing a part in the ministry of the church—I may be relocated, retired, disabled...or deceased. But I would like to think that, however many years I have left at Trinity, I can be instrumental in charting its course and thus shaping its future. I would like to think that Trinity, as it thrives in the year 2041, is faithfully fulfilling its mission by being no more, yet no less, than it is called to be by the great King and Head of the Church, even our Lord Jesus Christ.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Over the course of assembling my bibliographic resources, I became quickly convinced that the topic is impossibly large, incorporating insights from biblical theology, systematic theology, world missions, church planting, and cultural engagement, to name just a few. Sensing the need to place some reasonable limits upon the content of the bibliography, I have attempted to collect a broad yet selective swath of materials that will be of particular interest and usefulness to those investigating the mission of the church from within the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition. One of my hopes is that these resources may serve as a good starting point for others within our tradition who wish to reflect seriously upon the mission of the visible church. It goes without saying that there are innumerable valuable resources that one might consider that fall outside the purview of this thesis. Indebtedness is expressed to Dr. David Coffin for the identification of some of the Southern Presbyterian sources.

Adger, John Bailey. "Dr. Thornwell's Memorial on the Recognition of Christianity in the Constitution." *Southern Presbyterian Review* 16, no. 1 (July 1863): 77-86.

———. "The General Assembly of Columbia." *Southern Presbyterian Review* 16, no. 1 (July 1863): 87-119.

Bannerman, James. *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Disciplines, and Government of the Christian Church*. Vol. 2. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1868.

Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008.

Bavinck, J.H. *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960.

Berkouwer, G.C. *The Church. Studies in Dogmatics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976.

- Boggs, William E. "Church and State in their Reciprocal Relations and Fundamental Contrast." *Southern Presbyterian Review* 35, no. 1 (January 1884): 137 ff.
- Carson, D.A. *Christ and Culture Revisited*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008.
- Clowney, Edmund P. *The Church: Contours of Christian Theology*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995.
- Clowney, Edmund P. "The Politics of the Kingdom." *Westminster Theological Journal* vol. 41, no. 2, (Spring 1979): 291-310.
- Conn, Harvie M. *Evangelism: Doing Justice and Preaching Grace*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982.
- Curry, A.B. "The Relation of the Church to the Prohibition Movement." *Presbyterian Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (July 1887): 169-173.
- Dabney, Robert L. "Civil Ethics." In *Discussions*. Vol. 3. Philosophical. Edited by C. R. Vaughan, 302-328. Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1982.
- . "Civic Ethics." In *The Practical Philosophy. Being the Philosophy of the Feelings, of the Will, and of the Conscience, With the Ascertainment of Particular Rights and Duties*, 372-419. Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1984.
- . "The Civil Magistrate." In *Syllabus and Notes of the Course of Systematic and Polemic Theology Taught in Union Theological Seminary, Virginia*. Richmond, VA: Published by the Students, 1871.
- . "Religious Liberty and Church and State." In *Syllabus and Notes of the Course of Systematic and Polemic Theology Taught in Union Theological Seminary, Virginia*. Richmond, VA: Published by the Students, 1871.
- . "Dr. Dabney's Reply to Dr. Pitzer's Criticisms of the 'Open Letter.'" *CP* 23, no. 11 (Sept. 28, 1887): 2.
- . "The New State-Church." *CP* 3, no. 28 (Jan. 29, 1868): 2; "Religious Liberty." *CP* 3, no. 29 (Feb. 5, 1868): 2; "Is Jesus Christ King of Nations?" *CP* 3, no. 30 (Feb. 12, 1868): 2; the first article only reprinted in *Discussions by Robert L. Dabney, D.D., LL.D.* Ed. by J.H. Varner. Vol. V, Miscellaneous Writings. Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1999, 275-279.
- . Review of *The Memoir of Rev. Samuel B. McPheeters, D.D.* *Southern Presbyterian Review* 22, no. 2 (Apr. 1871): 235-254.

DeYoung, Kevin, and Greg Gilbert. *What Is the Mission of the Church?: Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011.

Gaffin, Jr., Richard B. *Perspectives on Pentecost: Studies in New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit*. Phillisburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1979.

Gillespie, George. *Aaron's Rod Blossoming; or The Divine Ordinance of Church Government Vindicated; So as the Present Erastian Controversy Concerning the Distinction of Civil and Ecclesiastical Government, Excommunication and Suspension, Is Fully Debated and Discussed, From the Holy Scripture, From the Jewish and Christian Antiquities, From the Consent of Later Writers, From the True Nature and Rights of Magistracy, and From the Groundlessness of the Chief Objections Made Against the Presbyterian Government, In Point of a Domineering Arbitrary Unlimited Power*. Edinburgh: Robert Ogle, and Oliver and Boyd, 1844.

Graham, Jr., Preston D. *A Kingdom Not of This World: Stuart Robinson's Struggle to Distinguish the Sacred from the Secular during the Civil War*. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2002.

Hart, Darryl.G. *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.

———. *From Billy Graham to Sarah Palin: Evangelicals and the Betrayal of American Conservatism*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011.

———. *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: 2002.

———. *A Secular Faith: Why Christianity Favors the Separation of Church and State*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006.

———. *That Old-Time Religion in Modern America: Evangelical Protestantism in the Twentieth Century*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002.

Hart, D.G., and John R. Muether. "The Spirituality of the Church." *Ordained Servant* 7, no. 3 (July 1998), 64-66.

- Hart, D.G. "The Spirituality Of The Church, The Westminster Standards, And Nineteenth-Century American Presbyterianism." Paper presented 1996 Calvin Conference, 1996.
- Henry, Carl F.H. *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003.
- Hodge, Charles. *The Church and Its Polity*. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1879.
- Horton, Michael S. *The Gospel Commission: Recovering God's Strategy for Making Disciples*. Grand Rapids, MI, Baker, 2012.
- . *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008.
- Hunter, James Davison. *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Jones, Alfred. "Thoughts on the Relations of Church and State." *The Presbyterian Quarterly* 4 (April 1890).
- Keller, Timothy J., *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012.
- . *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2012.
- . *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road*. 2nd ed. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997.
- Kline, Meredith G. *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006.
- . "Minority Report, Committee on Foreign Missions." *Presbyterian Guardian* 33 (May-June 1964), 81-82.
- Köstenberger, Andreas J., and Peter T. O'Brien. *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001.
- Kuiper, R.B. *The Glorious Body of Christ*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1967.
- Law, Samuel Spahr. *Reasons for the Organization and for the Perpetuation of the Southern Presbyterian Church* n.p., n.d. [1910?].

- Lints, Richard, ed. *Renewing the Evangelical Mission*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013.
- Machen, J. Gresham. "The Responsibility of the Church in Our New Age." In *What is Christianity? And Other Addresses*. Edited by Ned Bernard Stonehouse, 272-287. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1951.
- McIlhenny, Ryan. "A Third-Way Reformed Approach to Christ and Culture: Appropriating Kuperian Neocalvinism and the Two Kingdoms Perspective." *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 20 (2009), 75-94.
- McPheeters, William M. "The Spirituality of the Church." *Christian Observer* (October 24, 1888).
- Murray, Iain H. *The Reformation of the Church: A Collection of Reformed and Puritan Documents on Church Issues*. Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965.
- Niebuhr, H. Richard. *Christ and Culture*. New York: Harper, 1951.
- O'Brien, P.T. *Gospel and Mission in the writings of Paul: An Exegetical and Theological Analysis*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993.
- Peck, Thomas E. "Church and State." *Southern Presbyterian Review* 16, no. 2 (October 1863): 121-144.
- . "XII. The Nature and Extent of Church Power" In *Notes on Ecclesiology*, 106-119. Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1892.
- . "XIII. The Power Ecclesiastical Contrasted With the Power Civil. Relation of the Church to the State." In *Notes on Ecclesiology*, 119-156. Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1892.
- Piper, John. *Let the Nations Be Glad!: The Supremacy of God in Missions*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003.
- Robinson, Stuart. *The church of God as an essential element of the Gospel, and the Idea, Structure, and functions thereof. A discourse in four parts*. Philadelphia: J. M. Wilson, 1858.
- . "Of the Place of the Church in the Revealed Scheme of Redemption; and the Doctrine of the Church as Fundamental in the Gospel Theology" Appendix to *Discourses of Redemption: As Revealed at "Sundry Times and in Divers Manners,"* Louisville, KY: A. Davidson, 1866, 453-470.

- . “Relation of the Temporal and Spiritual Powers Historically Considered. The Scoto-American Theory.” Appendix to *Discourses of Redemption: As Revealed at “Sundry Times and in Divers Manners,”* Louisville, KY: A. Davidson, 1866, 474-488.
- Ryken, Philip Graham. *City on a Hill: Reclaiming the Biblical Pattern for the Church in the 21st Century*. Chicago, IL: Moody, 2003.
- Schnabel, Eckhard, *Early Christian Mission: Jesus and the Twelve*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004.
- Sills, M. David. *Reaching and Teaching: A Call to Great Commission Obedience*. Chicago: Moody, 2010.
- Slade, Peter. *Open Friendship in a Closed Society: Mission Mississippi and a Theology of Friendship*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Smith, James K.A. “Reforming Public Theology: Two Kingdoms, or Two Cities?” *Calvin Theological Journal* Volume 47 (2012), 122-137.
- Spence, Thomas. *The Southern Presbyterian Church and the Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church*. PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1929.
- Stellman, Jason J. *Dual Citizens: Worship and Life between the Already and the Not Yet*. Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Publishers, 2009.
- Stott, John R.W. *Christian Mission in the Modern World*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1975.
- Thornwell, James Henley. “Address to All the Churches of Christ.” In *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell, D.D., LL.D. Vol. 4, Ecclesiastical.*, 446-464. Edited by John B. Adger, D.D. and John L. Girardeau, D.D. New York: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1873.
- . “Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America.” In *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*. Vol 4: Ecclesiastical. 446-452. Reprint, London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974.
- . “Societies for Moral Reform.” In *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell, D.D., LL.D. Vol. 4, Ecclesiastical.*, 469-471. Edited by John B. Adger, D.D. and John L. Girardeau, D.D. New York: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1873.
- Um, Stephen T., and Justin Buzzard. *Why Cities Matter: To God, the Culture, and the Church*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013.

- VanDrunen, David. *A Biblical Case for Natural Law*. Grand Rapids: Acton Institute, n.d.
- . *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010.
- . *Living in God's Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010.
- Van Dyke, Henry J. *The Spirituality and Independence of the Church*. A Speech Delivered in the Synod of New York, October 18th, 1864. By Henry J. Van Dyke, Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, Brooklyn: 1864.
- Vaughan, C.R. "The Non-Secular Character of the Church." *Presbyterian Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (October 1888): 412-444.
- Wells, David F. *God in the Whirlwind*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014.
- . *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams*. Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans, 1995.
- . *No Place for Truth: Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans, 1994.
- Wilson, Samuel R. "Declaration and Testimony against the Erroneous and Heretical Doctrines and Practices which have obtained and been propagated in the Presbyterian Church in the United States during the past five years." 1865; also printed in Minutes of the Presbytery of Louisville. 1865, pp. 82-113. Reprinted in John S. Grasty, *Memoir of Rev. Samuel B. McPheeters*. St. Louis: Southwestern., 1871, pp. 316-27.
- Wright, Christopher J.H. *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*. Wheaton: InterVarsity Academic, 2006.
- . *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010.

VITA

Full Name: David Allen Sherwood

Date and Place of Birth: March 14, 1961, West Chester, Pennsylvania

Education/Degrees:

Duke University, A.B., 1983, *magna cum laude*

Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, M.Div, 1987, *magna cum laude*

Ordination: November 1988, North Texas Presbytery, Presbyterian Church in America

Years of D.Min Work: 2011-present

Expected Graduation: January 2017